A PURITAN'S WIFE

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Merle Xmas

A Puritan's Wife

By MAX PEMBERTON

Author of "The Little Huguenot"

BEING the Story of Hugh Peters, the Son of Jonathan Peters of Warboys in the County of Huntingdon; and the nephew of that Hugh Peters who was Chaplain to the Lord-General, Cromwell. On which account, and by reason of what he did after the Great Battle of Worcester, many perils befell him, as are hereinafter set out; together with the History of Lady Marjory, the Daughter of John, Earl of Quinton, in so far as her story is his own. All of which is to be read in the great Library at Warboys; as it has been by this present writer, who here makes record of his labours.

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A PURITAN'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

I FALL TO THINKING OF OLD DAYS

I WAS ever a light sleeper, but upon that morning of May, when Master Ford came to visit me as I lay in the woods of Ambresbury, the sun was not up so soon as I; nor was the forest awake until I had lifted my voice in praise to God that he had given to me harbourage during another night from the perils which beset my path.

I know not why it was, nor could I think of any reason at the first moment of waking, but the break of the day seemed to carry my mind back to the years which I would well have forgotten. When I had dwelt upon it a little while, I remembered that it was my birthday, and that I was then thirty years old. And at this I gave thanks again, though I could not forget in what poor circumstances I then found

myself; nor what little likelihood there was that I should live through another year of such hazard and peril as had come to me in the year which it had now pleased God to add to my unhappy life. Indeed, I had no heart then that I should hope to live at all; and when in the sweet of the morning I went out a little way into the forest, yet with so light a foot that the deer continued to drink as I passed them by, I would have thought it happiness to have heard that the end of it all was at hand, and that the king's men were even then upon their way to my place of hiding.

This thought, I say, came to me; yet no sooner had it found a place of abiding in my mind than I put it from me again. Ill were it that I, who of Heaven's bounty had reaped so rich a harvest, should cast aside the sickle lightly, and forget those many blessings which had been vouchsafed to me. To what worth of mine, I asked, did I owe it that I was here safe harboured in the forest by Epping, when many of those that had been comrades with me were lying in their graves, or were banished beyond the sea? By what work of grace abounding had I merited this clemency, that I

should breathe the breath of the morning air and enjoy the sweetness of the woods when my kinsmen were lying in jail, remembered of none, nor likely to be remembered until the hangman should think of them? By God's mercy, my health and my liberty remained to me. There was no silent place of the forest of which I did not, to my own content, seem lord and master. Even the fallow deer had come to know me, and were frightened no longer at my approach. The very marsh marigolds, which made a golden pillow for my head, reminded me always of little Marjory and the days when I had played with her in her father's park at Warboys. The lark singing breathed her name for me as he winged upward from the meadows; the wind gave it to me for the message of its music. There was no sound in all the woods which did not carry me back in the folly of my thoughts to my old home, and to all that had made it so dear to me before this great trouble came upon my country.

There were some who would teach me in my youth that exceeding love of woman is a sin not to be committed by one to whom salvation has come; but this is no doctrine

of the law to my mind. And if it be, then God forgive me who hath so loved this little wife of mine that all else in the world is as nothing to my memory of her. Sleeping or waking, at my work or at my rest, I thought to hear her voice bidding me be of good cheer in the days of my adversity. Often in the dark of a winter's night, when I have returned to my little hut, lying here by the pool at Ambresbury, and have thrown myself upon my bed of rushes, praying that I might rise from it no more, her face has seemed to be near mine, and her hand to clasp my own, raising me up from the slough of my distress to the hope of that day, if ever it was to be mine, when I should hold her in my arms again. And this was my exceeding folly — both to believe that she was my wife, and that she so much as remembered the name of Hugh Peters that had called himself her friend.

If this be an overbold thing to write, a little word upon it will justify all that I feared then and during the season of doubt which followed so closely upon that morning of my birthday. Seven years had passed since I had seen her whom I called, and would ever call, my wife. She was the second child of

my lord the Earl of Quinton, whose estates in the county of Huntingdon lay as close to my father's house as two eggs might lie in a nest together; and though he fell fighting the king at Worcester, and my father had ever a leaning, though not so much as to risk anything thereby, to the cause of the Lord Protector, there was little of these things to be heard at our home; nor any of that wicked hate of kinsman for kinsman which these late troubles have bred in the land. So it came about that when the earl was killed in the great battle, and all his lands were given to them that knew best how to beg them of the Lord-General, little Marjory came to our house and there got a home with us. I had entered upon my nineteenth year then; she was in her fourteenth, the only friend beyond Parson Ford, my father's minister, that I had ever known. Nay, there is no year so far back that some little word of Marjory's is not remembered for it; and when she came at last to my home, it seemed to me that in her heart she had always been there, and that she was sent to us as one for whom we had long waited, to be the light and the happiness of our days.

I had come back from the war three years then, being sent thereto by my father, who, desiring that he should stand well with the Lord-General, yet willing to take no part that would imperil him if the king came to his own again, offered me for the service. He said that it became every man that was a man to learn that which war alone could teach him, — the right use of musket and sword and the mastery of his horse. There were few more skilful with the rapier than he; and even Parson Ford, the minister, was taught by him so to hold himself that he was as good as any other man when blade touched blade and the green was merry with the beating of the feet. Many is the great affair we have had in our own garden, when the parson so warmed himself in the work that he drank as much sack as any roaring devil of a Cavaliersman, and swore such foul-mouthed oaths when another pinked him that he would spend hours in his closet afterwards begging the Lord's mercy for his sin. Admirable Master Ford, — what would I not have given to have heard his voice in the silence of the woods of Ambresbury!

I went out to the war, and for my uncle's

sake was made one of the Lord-General's own. It is not for me to speak here of the part I played at Worcester; nor of how it befell that I was sent with them that hunted Charles Stuart at Boscobel. Few remembered these things while the Commonwealth was; but when General Monk brought the king from the Hague, and all the talk was of mercy and of pardon, none were so bold as to plead for Hugh Peters, nor to ask that he should find clemency. Nay, they dragged my uncle upon a hurdle to the scaffold, and they put a price upon my own head, so that any man might strike me down where he should find me, and have nothing but profit of my hurt. What fair word my father could have spoken for me was not to be uttered; for he, mighty anxious to be first amongst those that went out to greet King Charles, was brought to bed of a fever at Scheveling; and there he died, more concerned to make his peace with Heaven than to ask mercy for those who were left to mourn him. Hereafter, I was alone with my troubles, for our home was given to strangers; and all my thought was not of my possessions, but only how I might escape the king's men. Three

years I dwelt in France, owing much to my mother's sister, who had married a gentleman of Paris, and there I heard often of Parson Ford, but rarely of little Marjory. They said that her brother had come to be the earl, and that she was in great favour with the Papist woman whom the king's brother then admitted to be his wife. I had news of her, now that she was with her kinsman, Sir Allen Apsley, at his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, now that she had become lady to the duchess; but they spoke always of her exceeding prettiness and of her new pride that she had come to such great estate. And at this I remember the day when I was married to her in the woods about Warboys; and I laughed aloud when I told myself that she was my wife.

All this, I say, was in my mind when I walked abroad that May morning. I had been in England nigh three months then, yet never once could I bring myself to set foot outside the sure retreat that I had in the forest of Ambresbury. The same love of country, and love of my dear wife, which brought me out of Paris, happen what might, was tempered so soon as I came to England

by that love of life which is God-given in every man. I thought that they would have forgotten Hugh Peters, five years being past; but they had better memories. It was known all along that I was in the French king's city, and my departure therefrom did but add to their suspicions about me. A new writ was put abroad offering five hundred guineas to him who would take me. I heard that they watched the seaports for my coming. Hunted by day and night, like some evil thing that must be stamped upon and destroyed, I hid myself at last in the woods of Epping, and there amid the cut-purses, and rogues, and robbers that make a hell of these fair places, I found that rest which three years of wandering had not given to me.

Twice by favour of Morley, the king's keeper that was long servant to my own father, did I write to Master Ford telling him how things stood with me. No answer was brought back; and at this I fell to thinking that the old minister was dead and that no friend in all the country remained to me. But in this I was wrong, as you shall learn presently; for I had walked but a little way through the woods on the morning of which

I write when what should I hear but the voice of one singing, very dolefully, a verse from the thirty-first Psalm; and at that, the blood went rushing to my head for the joy of it, and I ran on through the thicket crying for very gladness that I should have found a friend again.

CHAPTER II

PARSON FORD COMES TO AMBRESBURY

The sun had risen now, and his light came winging through the pollards so plenteously that all the pool below was shining as with little waves of gold. Never, I vow, has man looked upon a more bewitching place than those banks of Ambresbury as they were then at the first of the morning, when the grass drank in her draught of refreshing dew, and the marsh marigolds opened their petals to the warming sunbeams, and the air was hot with the odour of roses. Many a time and oft have I stood in that very spot to think that in no other country but my own could you hap upon a harbourage of such sweet solitude, or find a forest so fair in all the truest gifts of God. And now when out of the silence of the day, a call, like a call of the years which were dead, came to me from the thicket about my little hut, then, indeed, was my heart

robbed of half its sorrow and all my joy of life was given back to me.

I ran on through the thicket, I say, brushing back the bush and fern from the rarely-trodden path; and when I had gone perhaps a half way through it, I saw Master Ford, riding slowly toward me upon a great black horse. And treading upon his heels, so to speak, was none other than his servant Gideon, who was ever a man of huge stature; but riding as he was then upon a poor lean beast that could scarce have served for a boy at his school, he appeared to me to be the tallest man I had ever seen. Yet who could write of my joy to behold their faces again, or to watch them coming, ay, so slowly, to my place of hiding, and knowing not, I vow, if he whom they sought were alive or dead?

"Oh, Master Ford, Master Ford!" cried I. able to bear with it no more, and running now even to the head of his great horse, "the Lord Jesus be glorified that I have lived for this day, — nay, speak to me, for I want words for my lips! And you, Gideon, oh, for a truth, it is the Gideon I have loved long ago!"

I do believe that tears came into my eyes

when Master Ford held out his hand to me, and I took it in both my own. Five years had passed, and I had been a stranger among those who cared only for the day when I should leave them. But here was one who could bring with him all the love and memory of my home; and the measure of my happiness overflowed even before he spake. Nay, I can see him to this day, sitting there with his stern face, and his little twinkling eyes that looked round one into the other, and his legs sticking out from the sides of his horse like bones from a fish's back, and his staff held like a pike in his hand. And my love for him is no less than it was when he answered me, not as father to son, but as minister to him that hath fallen back. Nay, he spoke a word of the Scriptures.

"For Thou, Lord God, knowest Thy servant," he said, looking up to the blue heaven above him; "for Thy word's sake, and according to Thine own heart, hast Thou done all these great things to make Thy servant know them!"

But Gideon said: —

"Surely thou art flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, and the Lord hath given thee

back to us. Oh, great be the day, that I have lived to see it!"

I wrung the honest fellow's hand very heartily, and then my old master began to forget that he was a minister and to remember that he had come upon an errand of mercy.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh," he cried, putting his hand upon my shoulder very kindly, as he was wont to do when I was a little lad, "that we meet again thus; thou that wast a son to me, dear beyond all mine own! And now they hunt thee like a deer — and I, God help me, what comfort can I bring to thee?"

I told him that it was comfort enough to see him there in that desolate place; and talking, I verily believe, of twenty things at a breath, I led his horse down the bridle-path, and so to the door of the woodlander's hut, which was hidden away in the copse like a blackbird's nest in a thick-set hedge. He drew rein a moment at the mouth of the path, that he might cast his eyes over the forest about us, and then he seemed more contented with my situation.

"Well," he said, "it is a poor hovel of a place that they have given thee; but

surely, for this day thou wilt lie here in safety —"

"For this day," cried I, laughing, yet gladly, at his words, "nay, and for many a day, Master Ford, must I keep company with the herons. Have you not heard that there is a new writ put out against me?"

"Ay, surely, have I heard; and there was little beyond to give me news of thee. They talk of it in all the town, how thou hast come back with great secrets from the Court of the French king, and how, presently, thou wilt better thyself in the people's eyes thereby. And now thou must write to me so that others may put abroad thy place of hiding, and it may be a refuge for thee no more. O Hugh, my lad, was it for this that I taught thee prudence ten years? Truly art thou as a little child, and there is no guile in thee."

He spoke very kindly, but there was no manner of change in his talk since the day I had been as a son to him. He forgot, I make sure, that I was now long come to man's estate; and at this, had it been any other, I had laughed aloud.

"I wrote to you," said I, "since there is no one but yourself in all my country who cares

whether I live or die, except my Lady Marjory perchance — and she, I think, must now be too great in pride to remember Hugh Peters who was her playmate. Yet how it came that my letters fell into other hands I do not know, nor can I imagine what secrets they think that I have brought from the Court of France — unless it were this, to know the truth of adversity, and to be in hunger often. Nay, God has dealt hardly with me, Master Ford, — there is little but my strength of body left to me now."

"The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," now cried the honest Gideon; and then remembering for what he had come, he took it upon him to rebuke his master.

"Sir," said he, "my master's words are well enough in the pulpit, where he hath a cushion to beat upon; but here, in the forest of Epping, I doubt not that you will prefer his gifts which I now bear upon my pack, and in the safeguarding of which I have lately killed two rogues, whose bodies lie no more than a hundred paces from Chingford Church. For what saith the Scriptures: 'And he lodged that same night, and took of

that which came to his hand a present for Esau his brother.' (Item, two wheaten loaves.) For he said, 'I will appease him with the present that goeth before me.' (Item, a flask of the wine of France.) 'And afterwards I will see his face.' (Item, a ham of York.) 'And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked —' If there be any better beef without Aldgate than the loin I now carry to you, the Lord teach me to fast even as these Papists do."

There was no laugh upon his face when he made this sermon to us; and he sat bolt upright in his saddle, looking like some fierce man of Muscovy about to do a cruelty. But his words brought us to a remembrance of Master Ford's warning, and now we hastened to tether the horses to the little gate of the hut, and soon we were all three within, and our stomachs warming with the wine which they had carried for me. It was new to me to see Parson Ford draining a cup, but I had learnt the habit in France, and was mighty glad to resume it. As for the parson, he was not wanting a word of authority for his comfort.

"Thou must know, Hugh," said he, "that

I am as Timothy, taking a little wine for my stomach's sake. Yet this is no time to ask, what men eat or what men drink. Let the glory be given that I set eyes upon thee again. And first, when thou art able to speak for lack of any more will to eat, thou shalt tell of thy years in France, and I, in turn, will make known how it was that I came to thee, and at whose bidding I carry thee hence this night, God willing that we escape the perils which now hover over us. For they are perils, my lad, and the Lord's hand alone shall deliver thee from them, if it be that thou hast found favour in the sight of heaven."

Gideon answered to his prayer with a loud "Amen," the first word he had spoken since he sat to the food; and I, my whole body seeming to be full of new blood from the wine I had taken, told him how that I had come back from France for love of my country — for of my love for little Marjory I dared not to speak to one so stern. I asked him how it was that they could give me no news of him at Warboys, whither I had gone first to seek him; only then coming to Epping in my terror of the king's men that had nigh taken

me into the town of Huntingdon. To all of which he listened very kindly, and afterwards answered me with the whole story of it.

"Thou didst not hear of me at Warboys, Hugh," said he, "because three years have come and gone since I was driven from my home by this Convention Parliament, and must leave my flock to the wolves that hurried hither from the Low Countries at the king's return. It was in the month of thy going that little Marjory went from my house to her brother, who came to his own again when the king got his crown; and now she who was thy playmate is like a star at the Court, and pride sits upon her as a garment. Not that I make any complaint of her good fortune. In all this Job sinned not nor charged God foolishly. But I have it in my mind that a word of remembrance from one that hath the king's ear would be a kindness of much service to me. Little have they left me of my substance, Hugh; yet they put no bridle upon my tongue, and where the sheep are there is the shepherd's voice exhorting them."

This was all very well to hear, but I was impatient to get at the reason of his coming; and now I pressed him more closely, first

expressing my sorrow that he should tell such things of his own condition.

"You speak, old friend," said I, "of carrying me hence to-night, and of being bidden to do it. Who, then, is he that would help Hugh Peters upon such a day?"

"Ay," chimed in Gideon, "and that 's what he is coming to — though, Lord's mercy, he is as long o' the road as a waggon from France. Who would do thee a service, Master Hugh? — ask him that, ask him that. There 's water in the well if you do go but deep enough."

"You are both pleased to speak in parables," said I, "yet give me a plain word and I quit Ambresbury. I warn you fairly that I will go hence on no fool's errand. Here, I have a pillow for my head and a haunch for my belly, but God knows how long I may say the same if the Constable of Epping takes it into his head to put his warders upon the road by which I must pass out. I love my life for all that it has brought to me, Master Ford. If I am to put it in another's keeping, he shall be one who can speak in a tongue which I am able to understand —"

I was now a little heated, seeing them both smile at me, and Master Ford stopped me

with a gesture, as he would do in the old time.

"Tut, tut," cried he, "what talk is this of fair word and plain tongue? Hark to the lad that is as mine own son with his haunch and his pillow, and his Constable of Epping, and his — God's mercy! he will be drawing his sword upon me next."

"If he could give thee a little prick that would bring thee to the point, Master, I would even offer thanks myself," said Gideon. "What a tongue is that which must go lap up the butter and leave the meat in the dish! Tell him what he asks, — that it is my Lady Marjory who now sends for him, and that we find horses when the sun is gone down."

I looked at both of them, while my heart beat as though to burst.

"Gideon," said I, "what tale is this?"

"As much a tale as yon bone is a good York ham. Ask my master who knows?"

"It is, indeed, no tale, Hugh," said Master Ford, who rather took a pride in the old serving-man's forwardness than made any haste to resent it; "had there not been so much of mine own to speak to thee about, I would have told thee at my first coming.

Lady Marjory sends for thee out of the forest, and sends for thee now, since dost thou remain here another day there will be others looking for thee with the morrow's sun."

"My Lady Marjory sends for me!" I cried. "My —"

It was upon my lips, I vow, to say "my wife," and I can well imagine with what surprise Master Ford would have heard so strange a tale; but while I was all tingling with delight, and a great longing to be up and going was already upon me, I held my tongue, and so saved myself from the shame of it.

"Nay," said I, pretending indifference; "how should little Marjory so much as remember my name?"

"She remembers it because it hath lately been whispered in her ear by one, Morley, the king's keeper, who says that there is game by the banks of Ambresbury which other hands than his may come to hunt presently. And great lady that she is, Hugh, she can think still of those that were her playmates at Warboys. Oh, surely, she remembers thee so well that when she heard all this talk of the Puritan Hugh Peters, who was come from France to be a thorn in the king's side, what

must she do but send her servants to search out Son of Humility Ford, and bid him come to Ambresbury for thee, and so carry thee to Windsor, whither she goes with the duchess. There I doubt not she will find place of hiding for thee, even if it be so low as in her kitchen. They say that the king will dance when she pipes. Why, then, should she not pipe a tune that was in her ears in the long ago? Nay, she has promised it — though God grant she has a better memory for thee than for me."

"Amen to that," said I, though I was smarting still at his word that my lady should make me one of her serving-men. But this I hid from them.

"You speak," I continued, "of our setting out this night, and going so far as Windsor. It seems to me that I would do better to lie here until my lady has piped the tune of which you speak. In this place I have but my hunger and my loneliness; and these I can support. Once upon the road, God knows what may wait for me. And I do not forget that if I am to go, it must be upon my feet. Would you have me walk, Master Ford, or share a pack saddle with old Gideon?"

"Would I have thee sit upon the tail of a

cow? O Hugh, Hugh, when wilt thou learn the lessons which I was ten years teaching thee! Am I one to put the pack saddle upon the ox? The Lord give thee patience. Hadst thou but listened, I would have told thee that thou must set out to-night because this is the day when the earl shall be back in the forest again, bringing with him those that will beat every copse and thicket for thee as they would for a deer that is to be hunted. Even now there is talk in the town of Epping of the King's Guards, who are to come in at sundown. To-morrow's dawn, dost thou await it here, will see thee upon the road to Newgate jail, where, if the gibbet pass thee by assuredly thou wilt die of the plague, which, as thou mayest know, is the talk of all the city."

"Ay," said old Gideon, "and there will not be many dawns after before a rope shall swing thee up to the saints — which the Lord forbid. Would to heaven, Master Hugh, that one we love could tell thee a plain tale. For what does he mean by his oxen and his asses, his 'woulds' and his 'shoulds'? Why, God's mercy, he would say that my Lady Marjory has sent thee a horse and a cloak, and a sword for thy belt; and thinking that

none will look for thee if thou be bold enough to ride straight for Windsor, she is of the mind to employ thee at once — and we carry thee to her at dark. Is that to thy liking, master? Nay, I vow it is. Ho, Ho, I 'll swear on it — a bonnier serving-man shall not be found out of Scotland, nor a sweeter mistress. Pillars of grace! that it should come to a laugh with me."

He spoke no truth when he said that he laughed, for he only sat very stiff against the wooden walls of my little hut and chuckled most dismally, to the great anger of his master. But this was of great unconcern to him, for presently he fell to singing a verse writ by the papist poet Southwell: —

> "In lowly vales I mount
> To pleasure's highest pitch;
> My silly shroud true honor brings,
> My poor estate to rich."

And with this on his lips he tumbled into a deep sleep.

"Well, well," said the parson, content now that his tongue was stilled, "he has ridden far, and he means well to thee, Hugh. He has said all that I would have said, and we

have nothing now to do but to wait until the sun is set, and Keeper Morley is come with the horses. Until that shall be, I would speak with thee a little of thy soul; for oh, my lad, what shall it profit a man — "

But I heard no more; for I could think of nothing but this, — that I was to ride forth at sundown to meet her whom Tom Honeydew, the wine-bibbing parson of Quinton, had married to me for a jest in the woods of Warboys now nine years ago.

And I knew that I should find my little Marjory no more — and, God knows, I dared not to hope that she would remember that play beneath the trees when ranting Tom had made us man and wife, as he said, for the jest's sake.

CHAPTER III

WE ARE ESCORTED BY THE NIGHT BIRDS

I HAD a little sleep during the heat of the day; dreaming much of my youth at Warboys, when I had feared Master Ford and had smarted often at the swish of his twigs. But I awoke while the forest was still golden with the sunshine, and I found then that Gideon had been before me and was broiling a piece of the meat upon a fire of logs which he had kindled at our door. The parson still slept, however, and the heaviness of his breathing was like the deeper note of a trumpet.

"Let him lie, for God's sake," said old Gideon, as I came out of the cottage; "a prettier man in his sleep was never made; yet, look you, Master Hugh, the Lord surely slipped when he took the measure of his tongue. Pillars of grace! that I should speak ill of him whom I have cared for from his youth up — I that am in peril for mine old soul!"

"He has been asleep long?" I asked.

"He fell off at his thirdly. 'T is an odd thing to tell, sir, but I have so accustomed myself to his voice that when he sleeps, I wake. And that 's God Providence. Thou hast slept a little thyself, maybe — ay, surely, and now wilt take meat; for of what are the Lord's servants made but of sleep and meat, and a cup of good sack when that is to be had?"

"Have you seen aught of Keeper Morley, or the horses he was to bring?" I asked, as I threw myself upon the sweet grass by the side of his blazing fire.

"Not so much as the hoof of one — though the Lord forbid I should say that of Master Morley. It was at sundown we were to look for him, as thou mayest remember. Until he shall come there be plenty here to remind us of where we are and upon what errand we venture. Nay, for hard-swearing, lewd, and vainglorious cut-purses, Master Hugh, I would commend these banks of Ambresbury against any copse, thicket, or warren in the two kingdoms. Lord, to see their dirty faces through yonder trees as I have seen them this hour or more! Surely, the devil is fled from this

place, and the lowest of his angels keeps watch upon it. Thou knowest the old legend — how that in the cities of the good the hosts of darkness rest not day nor night; while so much as one little devil upon the wall will serve for the city of the evil-doers! No? Then I will even expound —"

"Nay, Gideon," said I, "there is too much in my head to-day that I should love your legends. I think it strange that you have seen these fellows from the warren, for in all my months here I have counted scarce ten of them. You say they came to grin at you?"

"Naught else; and one drew so close that I must shut his mouth with a faggot, and see his teeth go flying down his throat like pills from a surgeon's counter. A scurvy rascal, I make sure, that should long have been food for the gibbet. But, thanks be to God, sir, I am still the man I was — and as for thee, Lord's mercy, was there ever a quicker blade or a better lad come out of France than Hugh Peters? Oh, surely, we shall lie snug in the forest of Windsor before the King's Guard yet."

"And then, Gideon?"

"And then, Master Hugh? Why, then we

will turn to Him whose word is a lantern unto our feet and a light unto our paths. And if thou art not the one to whisper prettily into the ears of her that was thy playmate, I know not the man. Pillars of grace! that I should fall to talking of a maid!"

It was horrible, I swear, to hear old Gideon when he chuckled and mumbled to himself as then he did. I was in no mood for his jest; nor could I rest in any one place for long together, so did the thought that I was to see Marjory again burn me. A hundred schemes and plans and reckonings rushed upon my mind. I walked away into the copse to be alone with my hopes and fears; and while the sun's rays fell soft through the ripe green leaves, and the violets made a carpet for my feet, and the birds went winging at my coming, I said to myself that I, surely, was as one called from death to life; that to-morrow would be my new year's day, when I should see my dear wife and tell her — nay, I knew not what. Yet it was good to whisper her name here in the silence of the thickets; sweet to remember how pure a thing our love was when, for the jest's sake, Tom Honeydew, the tipsy parson, had married us, the boy and girl,

under the old yew tree in the great park at Warboys. Would she remember that folly? Would it have any hold upon the law? I asked myself these things as I had asked them a hundred, nay, a thousand times. God alone could answer me; yet I was no ninny to believe that the great lady would stoop quickly to him who was the farmer's son; nor be so wanting in her pride as to acknowledge that which lacked all witness and all probability. Or if she did, what help were that to me—who was an outcast from my people, a hue and cry for all that would stop to read the king's will? Never, for a truth, did the cup of happiness so play with a man as with Hugh Peters upon that day he set out from the forest by Ambresbury.

I had left Gideon, as I have told, broiling a piece of meat at the door of my hut, but when I returned to him presently there was another with him, a lad of Chingford, who led a great bay mare by the bridle-rein, and was even then delivering the message which keeper Morley had sent to us.

"My master says, sirs," he explained, "that he must not appear in this matter, but what he can do he has done. Ye will find the

mare well-conditioned and good in the gallop as any this side of London. 'Let them be gone as soon as the sun,' says my master, and thank God, say I, to see the quarters of such a squealing devil as this same mare I now bring to you; for of all the kicking, peevish, wicked — and that reminds me, masters, ye will find the great cloak safe in the pack, and as for my wage, that I am well content to leave to your honourable worships."

"Holy Samuel! heard ever a man such a talker?" cried Gideon, whose hands were already upon the pack, while I had the bridle of the mare. "Hark ye, boy, if ye do but spit it out like that all your life long, Lord! ye shall end as big in law as the Commons at Westminster. Get back now to Master Morley with a silver sixpence in your pocket, and tell him that if he seek us to-morrow he will know where we lie."

The lad took the sixpence, and, running off, called back to us from the wood that his master would come presently with a spade to bury him who rode the mare. His bawling woke Parson Ford from his sleep; and when we had made a meal, and I had put on the great black cloak, and the honest sword, which

were my lady's gifts, we were ready to set out. The sun was quite gone down then, and only a shimmer of grey light lit up the hollow between the thickets or gave a silvery face to the silent pools. The whole forest seemed to sleep; and when we knelt upon the grass to ask help of our God in the journey before us, our voices came winging back to us from a hundred places in the woods, and all the groves answered with their "Amens."

Our devotions being done, we mounted our beasts; I, the first upon the great mare, who set back her ears very threateningly, but stood quite still when I had my legs about her.

"She knows that she has found a master," exclaimed Parson Ford, very merrily; and then he went on to say: "A long farewell to Ambresbury, Hugh, and hey-day for little Marjory. By my soul! the cloak has made a soldier of thee again. I would not meet thee in a dark place for a hundred crowns."

"'T is little *thou* wouldst be worth to rob, master," said old Gideon, as he climbed upon his pony; but I said nothing. As I live, the

whole forest about me, which had seemed drear and dark and silent as the grave a moment before, was now alive with moving figures; and a hundred black forms were shaping above the dewy grass.

CHAPTER IV

THE AFFAIR IN THE WARREN

I WAS one who could look into the heart of the woods and behold things which a man bred in a city might never find there. Though it was near now to being quite dark, and the figures of the rogues who lurked behind the trees were scarce to be distinguished from the trunks which hid them, I saw plainly that we were watched. Yet for what purpose, if it were not for robbery, I could not conceive; and I knew too well with what manner of men we had to deal to think of any overt act which would bring them out upon us. If, I said, we were to get to the high-road at all, then must we push on while these fellows yet hesitated to show themselves. And so thinking I led the way down the bridle-path towards the warren, meaning thus to strike upon Crown Hill and so upon the great road to Waltham.

We were an odd company, I vow. As for myself, I was a hybrid thing in my tattered suit of homespun and my new finery which had come to me of my lady's bounty — to say nothing of the vixenish mare which would go neither straight forward nor straight back, but only sideways, and that ill-temperedly. I had bidden Master Ford ride at my heels, that his great black horse might not trip him in the rough of the path; but Gideon, whose feet brushed the ground while he rode, lagged some way behind us, and we could tell where he was only by the doleful singing and swearing with which he ever cheered himself.

It was in this order that we rode, it may be for the third of a mile. The others, I was sure, had seen nothing of the rogues in the thickets, their eyes being set on the path before them; but I, who watched the woods unrestingly, felt my heart grow colder and colder when I observed that newcomers were added to the number of those that followed us, and that all the glades about were now alive with men. And this was even more strange — that the rogues should follow us thus silently, neither speaking one to the other, nor making the least show to do us

hurt. It was only when I remembered that we were riding directly for the warren, which was, above all, the stronghold of the unnumbered outlaws who then hid themselves in the forest, that I divined their purpose and read for the first time what ill it boded to us.

"Master Ford," said I, drawing rein suddenly, "it seems that we have company."

He looked up quickly, for I believe he had been near to sleeping.

"Eh, Hugh," cried he, "what was that?"

I pointed to a place of the forest into which the moonlight now fell abundantly — a very glade of the fairies, with its gnarled trunks and its sweet grasses, and a little lake nestling prettily in its hollow. There were, perhaps, a dozen rogues gathered at this spot, and it was clear that they had begun to consult together.

"Now," said I, when the parson, who suffered some weakness of his eyes, had seen what I had seen, "yon fellows have followed us from the hut. We shall have trouble with them by-and-by."

Master Ford stuck out his legs more than ever from his horse's back, and answered scornfully.

"What!" cried he, "you draw rein because a dozen rogues gape together in a thicket. Shame on you, Hugh, that was a lad of spirit. God's mercy! I would worst the dozen of them with my cudgel. Where is Gideon—?"

He turned round in his saddle, and at this moment Gideon rode up to us, labouring for his breath most painfully.

"Sirs," said he, "surely this horse was born on a Friday, and, the Lord willing, another Friday shall not pass—"

"Hush, Gideon," said I, "and tell me what you think of yon company."

I had let my mare go at the walk again, fearing to draw the night-birds down upon us, and the others followed, speaking of the affair with hushed voices.

"A scurvy pack, that would break our heads for a crown!" muttered Gideon.

"Lord deliver me from the burden of this serving-woman," exclaimed Master Ford, who was the readiest man in a brawl that I ever clapped eyes upon.

"Come," said I, hushing Gideon's angry protest; "this is no place for words. If we bide here long, I'm thinking we shall lack

tongues to speak them. The path opens out, as you see. It is my plan that we go altogether, looking neither to the right nor to the left until we come upon the king's high-road. And you, Gideon, forget your songs, for God's sake."

"Ay, sir, surely," said he; "though the Lord knows what I will do with my tongue if I have not a psalm to keep it still. 'T would be well at the same time could ye prevail upon my master to bide swinging his cudgel until he shall have a head to break it upon."

"Gideon," said the parson, "you are an impertinent fellow, and some day you will commit the unpardonable sin."

It was beyond endurance to me to hear the pair talk so; and I knew well that they were very ignorant of those who now gathered about us in the grove. Of all the cut-purses and thieves to be found in the woods near to London, none were so much to be dreaded by honest folk as these footpads of Epping. They would slit our throats, I said, as quick as crack a nut; yet here were the two ninnies at my side disporting themselves with the airs of men who sat by their own hearths. For my part, I had begun to believe that we

should never get out of the grove at all — and it came very near to that, as you will see presently.

We were upon the outskirts of the warren which was the proper home of these outlaws, when the thing came to a head. Many little fires burning upon the grass in the hollows between the trees were to be observed here; and there were other tokens of the camp which the rogues had pitched in this place since man could remember. Had it been possible for me to venture out by way of the Epping road, I had avoided so dangerous a spot altogether; but I knew well that if all Parson Ford's words about the King's Guards were true, then, indeed, did my safety lie in these dangerous places of the woods. Nor had I time to debate upon it very long, for the vixenish mare carried me forward, whether I would or no; and scarce were we again under the trees, when the rogues, who had held back so long, sprang of a sudden from their hiding-places, and began to swarm about us like wild beasts about their prey.

The first man that came was a huge fellow dressed in a ragged suit of green, and wearing a little round cap, like the cap of a pop-

ish cardinal, set far back upon his head. He sprang from the shelter of a tree, and put his hand very playfully upon the bridle-rein of Master Ford's pony; but hardly was it placed there when I saw the parson swing his cudgel swiftly in the air and bring it down upon the man's head with a blow that was like the blow of a blacksmith's hammer upon a forge.

"One," cried the parson very methodically, as the man rolled upon the grass with all the sense knocked out of him; and then, turning to the ugly fellows who pressed upon him, he continued: —

"Hark ye, my friends: I am one of the Lord's ministers come to Epping upon a work of mercy. My name is Son of Humility Ford; my place of living is without the bars of Aldgate; and, as God is my witness, I will so split the head of the next man who puts hand upon my bridle, that all the surgeons in the kindred shall not mend the pieces. Ye hear that? Then keep your distance, rogues."

They answered him with a merry laugh; but presently a wench among them cried out that Tom Hill was surely murdered (mean-

ing, I suppose, the man whom Master Ford had struck), and at this there went up from them such an angry shout that I thought they had made an end of it upon the spot. It seemed to me that the moonlight fell upon a sea of upturned faces, and that these faces were white with passion; while of all the surly-looking villains I have ever beheld, none was so ugly or ill-visaged as the one who appeared to be their leader, and who now tried to lay his hand upon my cloak.

"What," cried he, "your ranter turns upon Tom Hill and cracks his skull! Hell take you for the French spy that you are. What say you, boys? How shall we do to them that have killed Tom Hill?"

Their answer was like the roar of a tempest.

"Hang them at Abbot's Oak;" "Burn them in the brake;" "Leave them to Joe the Smith;" "Dip them in the king's pond." These and a hundred like cries were all screamed together, both by the hussies who had run out from the tents of the gypsies and by the men who were their masters. For my own part I had hesitated a while to draw a sword upon the villains, and had regretted bitterly the blow which Parson

Ford was so ready to give; but now I saw that it was my life or the life of the man who sought to grapple with me, and of a sudden my blade leaped in the air and passion burned in my veins.

"That for your Abbot's Oak, and that for your Joe the Smith," cried I; and with each word I cut or thrust. And first I struck the great leader and laid open his throat, so that he fell, all bleeding, under the legs of my mare. Nor can I remember what happened to me for a spell after he had gone down. It seemed to me that I was carried, beast and all, away from the more open glade towards the darker place of the brake; yet there was no moment when my sword was not darting and leaping; and my arm quivered again and again as I struck through warm flesh. For the blows of fists or of sticks that were falling thick upon my head and shoulders I cared no more than for the beat of a twig. I was mad in fight; and shouting, slashing, and swearing, my beast helping me with her great lunges and her fierce kicking, I rode in and out, back and back again, now crushing through the brushwood, now galloping through

the glade — but always with those angry faces turned up to mine, and my ears full of the oaths and blasphemies which followed in my path like the raging of devils.

I say that the great mare helped me; but that is a poor word for all that she did. Never was I, nor any man, upon a beast so bred to war. Let but any rogue press upon her, and out went her heels like cannon shots. Twice I heard men's breasts crushed by her hoofs, like an egg is crushed with the hand; three times did she lay hold of a man's arm and wound it horribly with her teeth. Wherever she carried me, there did you hear woeful cries of pain and agony; and anon, when I could see the glade again — for the rogues were now all beaten away from me in terror of her — I vow that some little battle seemed to have been waged in the place. Five men, as I counted, lay huddled upon the grass — whether dead or only wanting their senses, I could not learn; twice that number were howling and screaming most dolefully for pain of their hurts. As for the wenches, their cries were dreadful to hear; and clear above all the hubbub and the din was the fife-like voice of

Parson Ford, or the deep baying note of old Gideon.

I had lost sight of these two in the time of my own need — though not for a moment did I cease to hear the voice of the parson; but now, when I beheld them again, they were a sight that cheered the heart to see. Master Ford still sat upon his great black horse, swinging his cudgel with all the cunning of a smith at the anvil; but old Gideon had come down from his pony, and, with his back set against the trunk of a hornbeam, he was crying "A Hugh! A Hugh!" with all his lungs; while at every blow of his staff a rogue reeled back and the circle of robbers around him spread out the more. I knew well that he had little need of my help; but for the parson I feared exceedingly. Twice I saw a blow from stick or cudgel fall upon his stooping shoulders; stones flew about his head as thick as flakes of driven snow; women beat his back with their fists, and their blows were like blows struck upon a drum. Yet never once did he cease to rail at them, nor to defy them with all that lusty love of combat which neither years nor calling could subdue.

"Who is the King of Glory?" I heard him cry again and again; "it is the Lord, strong and mighty," and then he would turn to mock them, saying: "Where is your Joe the Smith? Has he no word for the parson's ear? The Lord make my right arm strong. A hit! — a hit! Hast said thy prayers, rascal; then go say them in hell. What! thy skull is thick as steel. Oh, have at them! have at them!"

It was a pretty thing to behold, I vow, this jewel of a man sitting there upon the great horse, with the moon sending her aureola of light into the glade, and all the woods awake to the strange cries of the night. And surely God put it into the hearts of the rogues who attacked us to save their fire-arms — if it was that they had any — lest that should bring the king's men down upon their place of hiding. Never once in these fierce moments of our trouble with them did they try to use aught but their clubs and their knives and their sticks; and I make sure that we owed our lives as much to the cowardice of the pack as to our own strong arms. Rage as they would, few dared to close with us; yet it would have gone ill with Parson Ford, even before I could have ridden to his help, but for a new and

very sudden turn which affairs took at the very moment of his peril, and one which, as you shall see, carried me at the first rather to worse things than to better. And the manner of it was this: —

The thing befell at the very moment when they had pulled Master Ford from his horse and had got him down upon the grass, intending, it was plain, to make an end of him there and then. I saw him fall; yet, for the life of me, I could not drive the great mare up to his side, for she had become peevish again, and now stood stock-still, with her forelegs set out very obstinately and her ears backed with her tempers. At this, I called loudly to Gideon to run to his master's help; but before he could take a step there was a horn blown at the far side of the thicket, and at the second blast of it a musket was fired, and again another and another; while a great halloaing from all sides of the grove made it plain that we were surrounded, though by whom or for what purpose it was impossible to tell. I thought at the first that the King's Guards were surely come down upon us; and this, too, was the thought of the villains; for no sooner was the horn winded than away

they went, helter-skelter, into the thicket; and at the second musket-shot not a man of them was to be seen. As for myself, what with my fear that the soldiers had come and my joy to be quit of the rogues, I could do nothing for a spell but bawl to Master Ford, asking him sillily if he were killed or no; while old Gideon, long after the combat was done with, went on running up and down the glade, crying to the rogues that if they were men they would show themselves again. When at last I could prevail upon him to go to his master's help, he did so complainingly; but I saw now to my great content that the parson sat up on the grass; and presently he found his legs and staggered towards his horse.

"Is it thee, Hugh?" he asked, holding his hand to his head and shading his eyes that he might see me, "God be my witness that I did well to them — a scurvy pack, by my soul! Hast thou any wine in the flask, Gideon? Lord's mercy, I have blood upon my hands like a butcher!"

"Have they hurt you, Master Ford?" cried I, striking viciously at the brute I rode, for a more obstinate beast never mouthed a bit.

"How should they hurt me? Am I the man to mind the beat of a cudgel? — yet, if I must tell thee, Hugh, I believe that I have even got a prick from one of their knives in my back, to say nothing of my arms. The Lord be praised that I wore a corselet under my cloak, or surely I had been a dead man. Dost know who fired the muskets?"

I was about to tell him that I knew no more than the dead, when there came, as if in answer to him, another great report, and this from the thicket almost upon my left hand. So sudden was it, and so loud, that my ill-tempered mare leaped up when she heard it; and, being now fretted beyond control, she began to gallop through the warrens with me, and this put me to greater peril than any I had yet known. What with the branches to strike me from the saddle, and the holes without number in which the mare might have broken her legs, I said at every stride that my last hour had come, and that there was an end to Hugh Peters and to all his new-gotten hopes. Yesterday, it may be, when I cared not for man or devil, I had laughed at such a ride as this; yet, what must I do now but begin to remember that my little wife was

waiting for me at Windsor, and that but for this vixen which carried me, I might be with her again before the sun had risen twice. And at that I could have dashed myself to the ground in my anger; and I spurred the mare until my legs ached with their work, and we flew on as though the furies were at our heels.

I have ridden many a fine horse in my day — there was never a better beast born than old Rupert, who carried me at Worcester and afterwards in pursuit of Charles Stuart — but for speed in the heat of the gallop and for risk to him that rode, I would wager Keeper Morley's mare against any in the kingdom. God's Providence alone brought me safely out of the forest that night. Though many years have passed since the affair of the warrens, I could tell every moment of that ride as when it happened: how the branches cut my face; how the woods seemed to open and shut as I passed them by; how I saw little camp-fires burning, yet saw them but for seconds of time; how there were spells of darkness when we crashed through the thickets, and again spells of light where the moon fell soft in the sleeping glades; how the cut-purses rushed out of their beds to stare at me, yet were

gone again in an instant; how the wind blew fresh upon my face like a breeze sweeping up from the sea. Nay, it was a mad moment to live; and when I found myself at last out upon the high-road which goes over Crown Hill, I thought that I must have dreamed it, and that no man could have done such a thing unless it were that he had done it in a dream.

Once upon the road, I thought surely that the she-devil beneath me would make an end of it and answer to her bit; but she was of another mind. The greater freedom put new heart into her. She began to roar with her pleasure; and, giving three or four great kicks, she set off again towards a farmhouse near by.

And then it was that I saw by the moon's clear light the glitter of the trappings and the shining corselets of a troop of the King's Guards, who were riding out from the stables of the farm.

CHAPTER V

SIR NATHANIEL GOULDING LIES AT WALTHAM

I saw the troops, and my heart seemed to stand still, remembering as I did what Master Ford had said of their business in Ambresbury, and how they were to serve the Earl of Middlesex in his pursuit of me. I knew well that they had come to the quest of Hugh Peters; yet was I so ready to put my neck in a noose that I must go galloping toward them on the back of a great brute which was never meant to carry an honest man, but only to be the death of rogues. Nor could I think of anything more contrary than this — that the quarry should make straight for the hounds, and that no act of his should be able to turn him from his journey. For that was how it stood with me. The mare went the faster now with every stride she took. The foam from her mouth splashed all my face and ran down upon my cloak. While I was near to cutting

her tongue through with the bit, she heeded it no more than the tickle of a fly. Nay, she did but gallop the more; past the white mill and the keeper's cottage; straight over the brook at the hill's foot, yet always toward the troopers, and I, beating her with my fists, or rolling back in my saddle as I threw my weight upon the reins, or sawing at her mouth like one saws parchment with a string, was carried with her — straight, as it seemed to me, to the jail of Newgate and the hangman's noose.

There were moments when I had the thought to throw myself from the saddle and take risk of the hurt which should follow upon that; but some good instinct kept me to my seat; and when we turned the bend of the road, and I beheld the troopers, not in any good order, but all straggling the one behind the other, some devil seemed to spur me on; and, rather than seek to curb the mare, I urged her to the very top of her speed. Lord! what a child's courage filled my veins in that instant! The sight of the troopers sent all my fears flying from me, and bade me defy them. With a shout — such a shout as I had uttered in my first ride at Worcester — I made

straight at the men before me; and they — newly come, as I learned afterwards, from their supper at the farm, and not a little stupid with the ale they had drunk — had no will but to draw rein and let me pass. That I was he whom they hunted was a thought which never so much as entered their heads. They took me for some king's man — tipsy with wine and bound upon a pressing errand. Nay, they gave me a halloa when I passed them, and one called after me that he would risk a guinea for my mare.

I passed them by — some lolling drunkenly in their saddles, some trolling idle songs, some staring sleepily; yet for many minutes I dared not to believe that I had escaped them. "Surely," said I, "they will discover their mistake presently, and be up and after me." Yet, quick as my ears were, they told of no hoofs upon the road behind me. I turned round in my saddle and could shape nothing out of the darkness of the hollow. The road seemed to be deserted — not so much as a single horseman rode between me and the farm I had passed. Anon, when my silly mare began to pant and to stagger, and stood quite still at last with scarce strength enough

to keep upon her legs, I looked down from the little height of the hill and observed the troopers still riding slowly towards the town of Epping — but two of them were dismounted, and seemed to be quarrelling, while a third was talking to a wench who had run after him from the farm. I knew then that the wildest trick man ever played had been capped with success, and, giddy with the excitement and the pleasure of it, I laughed aloud for joy.

"A Hugh! Hugh!" cried I, "to-morrow shall see me at Windsor — to-morrow, to-morrow —"

"Dost thou shout like that, sir?" answered a voice from the further side of the hedge; "to-morrow will see thy heels in the air. Put bit upon thy tongue, man. Here is Master Ford crossing the fallow with them that saved us to-night — no others than Captain Goulding and Keeper Morley, who planned yon pretty trick in the hollow. Lord's mercy! there were but three of them in all, and yet, with their muskets and their horns, they must play the part of a king's company. Pillars of grace! I have been near to a laugh upon it!"

It was old Gideon who spoke, he having ridden to the hill-top by the short cut out of

the wood. And when he stood by my side, and I had told him of my ride, and pointed to the tipsy troopers below, I asked him for a further word about his news.

"Who, then, is Captain Goulding that he should help Hugh Peters?" said I.

"Out upon thee for a simpleton," he answered; but after a minute he said: "yet, how shouldst thou know — nay, 't is for love of little Marjory, sir, whom they say he is to marry at Whitsun."

"How, Gideon," cried I; "he is to marry — "

But I could say no more, for his words seemed to strike me like a blow, and all the ground went whirling round before my eyes.

Indeed, I thought for some minutes that I must tumble from my mare like a silly girl overtaken by a sickness; and while I could find no word with which to answer Gideon, I said to myself that there, for a truth, was the last blow upon the little house of my dreams.

It was an odd thing; but talk of this Captain Goulding had never come to me before. Many as were the thoughts which went wing-

ing through my mind while we stood for a minute upon the hill-top, the desire to see him and to know what sort of a man he was prevailed above any of them. My surprise, then, is to be judged when at last he rode through the broken gate; and I beheld by the moon's rich light no fop nor gallant of the Court, but a gentleman of some age (he being fifty years old, as I learnt afterwards), and one who at the first sight invited both the respect and confidence of his fellows. A properer man in speech I never listened to; and though I would have held myself back from him, as from one who was my enemy — though I would have done this, I say — yet so kind was his greeting to me, and so evident his desire to do me a service, that I found myself playing the child again, and listening to him with the air of a son who hears a father.

"So this is our madcap Puritan," cried he, drawing rein in the road, and laughing heartily when he beheld my mare. "*Ventre-bleu*, Master Peters, I see plainly why there be those who hunt for you in Epping. A man might ride many a mile to find such a beast as that. St. John, you went at them

like the devil! I've seen nothing like it since Naseby."

"Ay, lad," chimed in Master Ford, who was at the Captain's heels; "'t was a ride to make the heart beat. Lord, that thou shouldst sit there as dumb upon it as a scold in the pillory. Hast no word for him who brought us out of the wood yonder? This is Captain Goulding, sent by one who thinks of thee often, to carry thee to Windsor in his company. Dost not thank him, rascal? Lord, that I should have nested such a booby!"

I was nettled at this, and I turned upon him sharply.

"Master Ford," said I, "it seems to me that I owe my coming out of the wood as much to the beast which I ride as to any help of strangers, whosoever they be. Had I stopped to pay my compliments to this gentleman — surely, I had run upon the King's Guards in the hollow, and then —"

"Tut, tut, tut," cried the parson — and I went near to laughing at him, so ill had they bandaged his eye which was hurt, and his nose which was cut — "a plague upon thy loutish manners. Hast lost thy senses, Hugh?

God's mercy, I have the mind to lay my stick upon thy back."

"Come, come, Master," now cried old Gideon, "wouldst be blind in both eyes? Leave the lad alone until he shall have his breath again. For the matter of that, he would be the better for a cup of sack — as would the rest of us. But we shall be wanting it until we come to Waltham town, and a pretty maid to serve us. You would not hold us here all night in the argument, sir?"

"Well said," exclaimed Sir Nathaniel, turning his horse up the road; "a truce to talk, unless it be as we go. I am waiting to see the paces of Master Hugh's mare, and will even make him my body-guard. Two men that are both of Paris should not complain of each other's company."

He looked at me out of the corner of his cunning eyes, and the moon's light falling upon his face plenteous y, I observed that his beard was well-trimmed, and that he did not wear his own hair as the King's men did, but had a periwig, nicely curled and tied with silk, which helped him to make light of his years. There was, moreover, the fashion of France to be observed in all his clothes; and his way

of speaking, for he used many French words, was that of a man who had been long out of England. Nay, he was all vanity in his talk; and though I had the wish to draw rein and let him ride on by himself, I found that I could not help myself, but, well or ill, must listen to him. Nor did he rest his tongue at all when, we two going before, our little company set out for Waltham — yet none with so heavy a heart as Hugh Peters.

"It may be a surprise to you, Master Hugh," he began, without waiting for any word of compliment from me, "that I should speak of your coming out of France; but am I wrong in supposing that you were some years there in the company of your kinswoman, Madame de Pontac?"

"Sir," said I, sullenly, "it is as you suppose; yet why should you call me by that name, or why should you concern yourself with my affairs, is a thing I have yet to learn. I am 'Master Hugh' to my friends, and not to every stranger that rides a horse upon the King's high-road!"

I could see him bite his lip at this, and he made a movement of impatience, not to be concealed from me.

"Saint Dennis," he cried, with the air of a man affronted in a friendship, "you have a strange way of requiting a service, Master Peters. If I did not wish very well to you, I would surely ride on and leave you to the hangman, whose acquaintance you came near to making this night. Do you not see, *ami*, that I concern myself with your affairs because if some one does not stretch out a hand to you now, to-morrow or the morrow after that will find you where neither day nor night will be in your reckoning. *Dame*, you can ask me these things, and forget in the same breath that you met the Abbé Pregnani in the French king's city, and called him a cheat to his face! Body of St. John, a prince's ransom would not save your neck if the King's men laid hands upon you! Know you not what hopes they hold of the Abbé's work when he shall come here presently to persuade the King upon a matter which you heard talked of every day at Madame Kerovalle's house?"

It was all like the Greek tongue to me, I vow; and I knew no more than the dead of what he talked.

"Sir," said I, "you speak of those whose names, truly, I heard often in Paris, yet of

their deeds I know as much as the Prince of Muscovy. What is all this to do with me that am a plain man, seeking, God knows, but mine own safety and the rights which my countrymen enjoy. Yet, if it be as you say, and hurt is likely to come to me of these affairs, then what friendship is it to carry me to the park of Windsor, where the first King's man I meet may cry out upon me to my cost?"

I could see him thinking for a moment upon his answer; and he never lifted his prying little eyes from my face.

"Master Peters," he said at last, "they do not look in the door for the key which is lost. I play the daring part, yet so well do I understand it, that I will answer for your life with my own. You are going into the castle of Windsor to-morrow, not as a traveller come from the North, but as the servant of Sir Nathaniel Goulding, whom no one will question. You will lie there until those who have your interests at heart can secure your pardon, or some safer lodging for you. I will not ask you how it was that you could dwell for two years in Paris with ears which heard nothing and eyes which were shut. You know best what part you choose to play —

both before your friends and your enemies. When the day comes, and it will soon, for you to reckon me a friend, I doubt not that you will be more open with me — and to your own profit. What I have done this night was done for the sake of one, to please whom I would ride to the world's end. She has all the heart to help you, and it rests with you so to carry yourself before her that you do not lose her friendship. To-morrow she will speak for herself. We shall pass into the castle at sundown, and my men must so handle you that your own brother would not pick you from a hundred. What happens after will depend upon your own discretion; but you will not forget that your life hangs by a thread, which a whispered word may sever. I say no more now — yonder are the lights of Waltham town. Let us press on to supper and to bed."

He gave spurs to his horse, and I followed him — thinking nothing of all his talk, but only of little Marjory and of Gideon's words.

"She is my wife," I said in my heart. "Oh, God knows, she is my wife."

CHAPTER VI

WE COME TO THE PARK AT WINDSOR.

We lay until dawn at Waltham; but being in our saddles as soon as the sun was up, we struck upon the village of Barnet before the people were yet abroad. It was still the sweet of the morning when we observed the spires of the school and church at Harrow, standing up boldly upon their great green hill. In this place I learnt to my vexation that Master Ford proposed to turn back to London, leaving me henceforth to the care of Sir Nathaniel Goulding, who, as he was persuaded, could do the more for me.

"I cannot forget mine own people, Hugh," said he, "and what can be done for thee will be done now by those of whom thou hast the better right to ask it. I counsel thee, put not such a bitter face upon it when thou be come to Windsor; but recall to thy little playmate that once she was very willing to

ask aid of thee as now thou askest it of her. And if any do thee hurt, remember what thy father taught thee upon the green at Warboys. Nay, I have no fear for thee if thou wilt but look upon it lightly. God's mercy! when I had thy years I would have crossed a sword with all the rogues in the country, and reckoned it a pastime. A prayer upon thy lips, and an honest hilt for thy hand, what more wouldst thou have — unless it be a word of memory for him to whom thou wast, and art, as his own son. The God of Abraham bless thee, my lad, and shield thee from knowing aught of that tribulation to which I must now return."

He raised his hand in blessing, and drawing me a little apart from the others, he said cunningly: —

"Keep watch upon thy lips when thou speakest to yon gentleman. I like him, and yet I like him not. It might even be that a threat — but thou wilt judge. He is out of France, they tell me; and spoken of as one that is to know more of little Marjory than the rest of us. Yet if he is to be husband to her, we should do well to be discreet; and to that I exhort thee."

His words were ill enough for me to hear, though I believed them not; but I remembered that I should gain naught by wrestling in argument with him. And so I left him; he taking the King's road to London, while we struck upon the lane which should carry us to Uxbridge. Often after we had said our last word, I turned about in my saddle and beheld him still watching us from his perch upon the great black horse; while Gideon sat like a man of stone at his side, neither raising his hand nor making any other sign that this was a moment of parting. Only when the hill hid them from our sight did I begin to think again of this Captain Goulding, to whom I had now trusted my life, and in whose honour and fair-play all my hope must rest. And he, I said bitterly, was to be the husband of her for whom I would have shed the last drop of blood in my body. Never did God deal so hardly with a man!

I say that we struck upon the Uxbridge road; but it must not be thought that we went where all the world could see us. Nay, our path lay through leafy lanes and pleasant woods, where few gave us "Good-day;" and no man was bold enough to ask our errand.

I found my companion, who had now six servants in his train, to be a person of little speech, but of so proper a manner that my blood tingled when I remembered what part gossip was making him play. I asked myself if it were not right that a young girl should think of such a one before a plain soldier that had only his ragged clothes and his honest heart with which to dower her. I began even to upbraid my presumption in telling myself that I had any claim upon her memory. "Lord," said I, "what mad dream is this which Hugh Peters is dreaming? what folly is plaguing his head?" And then, do what I would, I seemed to hear Tom Honeydew's voice in the old park again, and his words: "Whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder," were like sweet oils in my ears.

"Oh," thought I, "if she will but remember that day as I remember it!"

With these troubles and dreams for company I journeyed on through the heat of the afternoon. Captain Goulding changed few words with me; and it was not until the sun began to sink and we rode into the great wooded park of Windsor, and to the house of

a keeper there, that he talked at all of the plan by which he was to bring me into the castle. But at the house he drew rein; and one coming out to meet him, we all went into a little room of the cottage, and he began to tell me what he would do.

"Now, Master Peters," said he, "let me beg of you to wear a prettier face than I have seen at my side all day. *Pardieu*, man, they will pick you from a hundred do you show them eyes like those. I might even suggest that, should you laugh but once while we go through the gate, all the King's men in Berkshire would never mistake you for your father's son. And remember, it is a hanging matter which so much as a silly whisper may bring to a head. God's life, my friend, if yon constable knew that Hugh Peters rode into Windsor with Nathaniel Goulding this night, it might even be that the pair of us would swing at dawn."

"Sir," said I, "is it right that you should stake so much for one —"

"*Tais-toi*, *tais-toi*," he cried, with an impatient motion of a hand that was as small and delicate as the hand of a woman; "this is no day for 'ifs' and 'ans.' Get into the

clothes we have brought for you; and then remember upon what errand you come. You can speak your word of thanks by-and-by, to her who has most right to them; and I doubt not you will make a good enough serving-man —"

"Captain Goulding," I exclaimed hotly, for he wore a cunning look when he spoke the words, "I was never yet known to serve any one, and by my soul, I will draw sword on the man —"

"Oh," cried he, raising his hands as one who despairs; "was there ever such a fellow to thrust his neck into the noose rather than play a part until the good hour comes!"

I was a little abashed at this, and I knew that my face was all red with the hot blood which went up to my head.

"If, indeed, it be as you say," cried I, "and this is done for my safety's sake, then I beg you to forget the words —"

"They are forgotten already, Master Peters," he answered very pleasantly; "only make haste to do as my men bid you, or the Southe Porte will be shut, and little supper will there be for you or me to-night."

Saying this he left me to his men, who had brought a very plain, but good, suit of grey stuff for my body and a periwig for my head — such a thing as I had never worn all my life long. Nay, I do not think that Master Ford would have known me when they had done with me — so changed was I from the Hugh Peters who lay yesterday by the banks of Ambresbury. Even the captain was pleased with my new appearance, and clapped his hands when I came out of the cottage to mount my horse again.

"Oh! good, good, good," he cried out, in his quick fashion of speaking. "Who would have thought they could do so well! And now, my man, I will trouble you to ride at my heels with yon fellows, and if you cannot hold your tongue — then say your prayers with it, for certainly you will hang to-morrow."

He pointed to the serving-men behind him; but as I turned to mingle with them, a woodlander, who had come out of the cottage and had been holding my bridle-rein, suddenly spake a word, but in so low a tone that I only heard.

"Sir," he whispered, "for God's sake be-

ware. Yon knave is leading you to a trap. If you love your life, do not pass the gates of Windsor with him."

And with that, he turned sharply upon his heel and went into the cottage again.

CHAPTER VII

I PASS THE GATES

I HAD turned my horse while the woodlander spoke, and for a moment my heart went thumping against my sides, and the warning which the man had uttered seemed to be echoed again and again in my ears.

"What am I doing?" I asked myself, as I drew rein suddenly. "Who is this Captain Goulding? How have I found a friend here in this strange place? Do I, truly, ride to my death?"

Dazed and giddy at the new alarm, perplexed as man never was before, I sat there upon my horse, and all the great trees seemed to dance towards me. "Oh," I cried in my heart, "if Master Ford had not left me!" But I knew that I stood alone; that seven swords would leap from their scabbards did I but touch my own. Nor could I hope to ride away from men so well mounted as Captain Goulding's company. They had put me upon

a sorry beast at Waltham, and he was already winded, and I doubted no longer that this was done for their intention.

There are occasions in all men's lives when, knowing that they have taken a wrong road, they must follow it yet awhile until the true way be discerned. So was it with me that night. Notwithstanding my perplexity and my suspicion, I said that I should gain nothing by bringing the rogues to account there in the park at Windsor, but must look for other opportunity. As the thing went, I had Parson Ford's word for it that little Marjory was even then in the castle; and while the risks were twofold, — one from the King's men discovering me, the other from the knavery of the new-gotten friend, — I declared that I would face them both if thereby I might touch once more the hand of her I loved so dearly.

"And," said I, "God help that man who first turns upon me, for surely I will rip him open like a sack."

This gave me a little of the courage I had known in the old time when I was first in the charge at Worcester. I began to remember that they had feared Hugh Peters then, hold-

ing him the equal at sword-play of any two in his company.

"If," said I, "it be my life or this man's, then the Lord strengthen my arm." Nay, I knew well that did it prove true, as Gideon declared, that he were the lover of my Lady Marjory, then, though I must die for it, would I yet find pretext to cross a blade with him.

We were out in the park now, and the golden light of the setting sun had touched the spires and towers of the mighty castle which rose up like a very city in our path. I could see the great keep lifting its head proudly above the turrets and steeples; and all its stones shone blood red under a heaven of crimson. Here and there upon the ramparts the pike of a guard was to be discerned; or the black nozzle of a cannon pointing down grimly upon the silent thickets of the park.

There was something to bring the mind to silence and to melancholy in the contemplation of this vast work of man's; so forbidding, so triumphant in its strength that man might never prevail against it. Indeed, its aspect to me was that of a little city of God shining now in the light of the eternal throne. And

even while I watched it, the sun sank behind the distant hills, and his passing recalled to me the coming night of my own hopes, — nay, a night which might even be the night of my death.

It was almost dark when at last we crossed the stone bridge above the deep castle ditch, and Sir Nathaniel Goulding challenged the sentry there. I heard the clanging of the arms, and the echo of the password as it went winging from man to man along the ramparts. Then we rode up together to the gate, and the guard, the better to observe us, began to thrust his lantern close to our faces. It was a moment when a strong man's heart might have quaked; and do what I would to remember Captain Goulding's wish, that I should carry myself bravely, no good thought would come to me. Indeed, I sat there like a figure of marble, so that even the sentry stopped when the rays from his lantern fell upon my eyes.

"Body of the devil, and who is this fellow?" was the man's cry.

I said nothing, leaving it to the captain to speak for me.

"That is Jacques Froibert, newly out of

France," answered Sir Nathaniel; "he has no English, or I doubt not he would speak as pleasantly as he looks."

The man shrugged his shoulders, thrusting his lantern the closer to my face; and, for a truth, he was so near to me that I made sure he would hear the beating of my heart.

"Oh," said he, "out of France, is he? — then the Lord take him back again to-morrow. Saw any one such a villainous countenance? Hast lost thy purse, Captain?"

The captain laughed.

"Did I give yon man the French of your words," said he, "it is likely that you would lose your nose before dawn. There is no finer swordsman in Paris."

At this the guard drew back suddenly.

"Oh," cried he, "I want no quarrel with the gentleman — out of France. Pray pass on, sir, and the devil sit lightly on your shoulders."

He made way for us, and we crossed the bridge to the great upper ward in whose windows many lights were now twinkling. And here one of the others took my horse from me, and the captain bade me follow him

to a room on that side of the court where the household was lodged.

"Come," said he, "my lady will be waiting for you — we must not keep her from supper. *Ventrebleu*, Master Peters, you are a lucky man."

But I did not answer him, for his words were scarce spoken when I stood in the presence of my little wife, and her greeting was in my ears.

CHAPTER VIII

MY LADY MARJORY FORGETS

She stood in the ingle nook of a large room, which had oaken walls and ceiling. Though it was now May, a fire of logs blazed upon the hearth and cast a ruddy light upon her girlish face, to its advantage. I saw her look up when I came in; but she turned away her eyes directly, and remained with head cast down and restless foot the while she spoke to us. I observed that she had now come to some maturity of womanhood; and her dress, of mighty fine stuff, together with the diamonds that glistened upon her breast, gave to her an air of wondrous dignity, as of a great court dame. Indeed, she was a picture for a man to see, and never did I think that any one could feel so silly as Hugh Peters, when he stood blundering before her.

"So," she said, yet looking still away from me, "so you have come safely with your charge, Sir Nathaniel?"

"As you see," he answered, with those proper manners for which I hated him the more; "as you see, my lady — we have made the journey; yet it is no fault of Master Peters that he is not still in the forest of Epping. *Dame*, I had as much trouble to persuade him as to lure quarry to the hounds."

"Sir," cried I, breaking out at this, "that is not well said. I was ready enough to come to Windsor, could you but assure me that those here meant well to me."

He shrugged his shoulders; while my lady held out her hand to me.

"Oh," she said, "surely this is the Hugh Peters I knew at Warboys — ever a lad to blow hot and cold like a day of April."

"Nay," said I, meaningly, "methinks that I am not the one against whom that is to be charged. There are others, my lady —"

"Oh, come, come," exclaimed the captain, "this is no time for silly talk, sir. You have been seeking a quarrel with this man or that ever since we turned our backs upon the hole we took you from. Have you no manners to thank those that befriend you?"

"Sir," said I, "if you will point my

friends out to me, I will make haste to do my duty."

My mistress laughed at this — the first time since we had come into the room. As for me, what with the giddy light of the candles and the heat of the fire and the bitter thoughts at my heart for the cold word spoken to me, I seemed to act like one walking in sleep; and all the room and the people in it were dancing before my eyes.

My mistress laughed, I say; but it was a hard little laugh, like the tap of a stick upon a board. And presently she said: —

"Perchance we had done better, Sir Nathaniel, had we not meddled at all in the affairs of so ungrateful a fellow. But as we have him here, and must in honour's sake answer for his safety, I will even ask you to instruct him in that which he must do the while he is at Windsor. The King comes at the beginning of the month, they tell me — until he be here, and I may speak a word to him, you will lodge Master Peters in the Devil's Tower, and number him among my pages. He will be wise enough to see where his safety lies, and to obey with-

out question such orders as you shall give him."

Sir Nathaniel bowed very gallantly.

"It is all done as you desire, my lady," said he "though you might find many a prettier page. He shall lie to-night with my own servants for his better security, and afterwards we will contrive together some good place of hiding for him. And if he show any temper, we have but to shout it out in yon ward that Hugh Peters lies in the Devil's Tower, and the guard will come to reason with him."

It was beyond bearing to me, I swear, to hear the taunts of this man now that he had got me through the gates of the castle. Yet with him I could have borne but for the cruel coldness of my lady, who laughed and jested and aired her pretty graces before me as though we two had known each other but a day. Wait as I might for one generous word from her, she gave me none — nor yet a look from the eyes which used to be so close to mine in the old time. Nay, I thought she seemed to relish my discomfiture; and at this my love turned sour in my heart, and I called

God to witness that I would abase myself neither before her nor the man whose presence was so welcome to her.

"Sir," said I, "you have been pleased to bespeak a plan for me, but now that your word is done, hark to me a moment. And first I would say this: that I will be menial to no man, nor woman neither, whoever they be. You brought me here with your tale that you meant well by me. Is it well that I must lie with servants? God bear witness that I will even sleep on the stones first. And since it comes to threats between me that trusted and you that gave the pledge, the Lord help me to teach you that I am a gentleman born, and as pretty a man with the sword as any King's pimp come out of Paris."

I said this, and the speech so worked upon me that my sword leaped from its scabbard even while I was in the argument; and, by heaven! I believe that but for my Lady Marjory I had slit his throat upon the spot. Nay, I can see it all to this day — the black room lit up by the tapers' light, the great fire blazing upon the hearth, the gentle hand of my mistress laid lovingly upon my arm, the sneering face of the King's man as he stepped back-

ward to the wall and his fingers gripped the hilt of his undrawn sword. And even now I hear little Marjory's cry as she began to reason with me.

"Hugh, Hugh," she said, forgetting all her mighty manner, "for shame to think of that! Is this your gentleman's teaching? Put up your sword, you silly boy. Indeed you shall tell Sir Nathaniel that you are very sorry. Oh, how like to the Hugh of Warboys, who was never happy but in some brawl upon the green!"

She held me tightly now, and her touch was to me as the touch of an armlet of roses. I could see her breast heaving with the quickness of her breathing; I could look deep into her sparkling eyes and try to find my message there. Yet this was the pleasure of a moment's durance, for Sir Nathaniel quickly spoke again, and at the sound of his voice she drew back and looked at me no more.

"Put up your sword, Master Hugh," said he, not unkindly; "I know how the wind of a young man's temper blows. We have ridden far, both, and would be the better for a cup of wine and a dish of meat. That we shall find in my own room, where I will even now per-

suade you what a wrong you do me. You may wait for morning to make me your apologies. Nay, I bear no grudge, as my lady shall witness."

"Most readily, Sir Nathaniel," said my lady, who had gone to stand by the fire again, "and he shall remember then that one who is gentleman-born does not draw his sword in the presence of his mistress."

They meant well to me, it would seem, and yet, I vow, tears stood in my eyes when I walked from the room; and my feet were heavy, as though lead were in my boots.

For I said always, "She has forgotten the jest."

CHAPTER IX

IN THE DEVIL'S TOWER

It was ten of the clock when they took me through the upper ward of the castle to the bed-chamber Sir Nathaniel Goulding had found for me in that tower, which to this day is called the Devil's Tower. Late as the hour was, I observed that they played a mask under the moon's light in one of the gardens near by the tennis court; and, Lord! to watch the tipsy cavaliers with their coats of gold and silver and the giddy jades they toyed with! And this was the strange part of it, that they should be bold in their sins here under the very windows of the Papish Church, which the Lord-General's men had gone near to destroying in their anger. I could not help but remember, then, how my country was fallen, that all this wickedness and evil-doing should be the sport even of them who stood nearest to the King's throne.

They had put me in the Devil's Tower, I say, in a little square room of stone, like to a prisoner's cell; but my word with Captain Goulding had so far prevailed that I lay alone; and this to my great content. I had found the captain mighty pleasant over the wine; though he talked always of France and of a certain Abbé Pregnani, whom I had met but once at Madame de Pontac's house in that city. It was his wish to convince me that I had been much with the abbé; and had been loud in my talk, when I was in Paris, that if the man ever came to my country I would have him hanged for a French spy and a charlatan. I knew that such a thing had never so much as entered my head; but he would not hear my "nay," and I left him doubting of it.

There was a little window in the turret where I slept; and, being come into my room, I stood awhile to look out upon the moonlit park and the garden, where many lanterns of pretty colours were lighted. It was pleasant enough to watch that fine company, as gay as players in a booth; yet, Lord! so mighty proud and so noisy in their laughter and talk that all the peace of the night was broken,

and Satan seemed to be come into the castle with them. For the matter of that I had gone to my bed at once, and left them to their music and their silly dancing had not I seen my lady Marjory as bold as any among them — ay, and better gowned and prettier than any hussy there. She was talking to Sir Nathaniel Goulding when I saw her, and he held her hand, not as a friend might have done, but as lover holds the hand of mistress. Once I saw his face bent down very close to hers; and, I vow, she looked up at him so willingly that I could bear with it no longer, and flung myself upon my bed, to rage in my heart more bitterly than I had ever done.

"Lord," said I, "what a folly to think that she who sits at Charles Stuart's feet will remember the farmer's son! That was done with long ago, when they took her from Warboys to her kinsman's great house in London. I am naught but a serving-man in her eyes — a booby whom she may laugh at. Did I tell her that there was a day when we two, boy and girl together, pledged our love before Tom Honeydew, the tipsy parson, and were by him made man and wife, she would call a

groom to whip me for the saying. But of that she shall never hear from me. Let her find a lover where she will," said I, "and God judge between us."

This was my determination, but it went ill with me when I recalled that day upon which I had held her in my arms in the park at Warboys, and we had kissed and kissed again; building, in our pretty fancies, a little house for ourselves, and peopling it with the children of our love. There were tears upon my pillow, I believe, when I fell to sleep at last; and my dreams were troubled, so that I thought to see men standing by my bedside, and to hear one say to the other, "I could pick him from a hundred." For a truth, so real was it, that I sprang up from my couch, and ran to the door of my chamber, which was now unlocked — a very strange thing, since I had barred it with my own hands so soon as I was come into the tower.

It must have been about the hour before daybreak. The whole castle slept, and there was no longer any light of the moon above the park. I stood upon the cold stones of my chamber, and listened at the stairs' head for any sound that might break my dream;

but while at the first I did not hear so much as the creak of a door, by-and-by I made sure that some one moved upon the landing below me. And at this I remembered the woodlander's warning, and cold sweat burst out upon my limbs. Nay, I feared to sleep any more, lest this should be indeed the danger of which he spake, and I sat long upon my bed, holding my drawn sword in my hand, and swearing that the first man who came in should reckon with me for his venture. But though my ears were never resting, and my eyes kept ever upon the door, I heard no other footfall until the dawn lifted the curtain of night from the forest again, and all the woods were awake to the merry music of the song-bird.

The dawn came, I say, yet still sleep was not for me. Fearing, I knew not what, I stood at my window while the herald of the morning drove night from the garden below me, and all the blossoms lifted up their heads that they might welcome him. Sweet it was there above that pretty bower, with the perfume of the gillyflowers strong in the air, and the breeze to blow freshly upon the face, and the silence of the new-born day to rest

the mind; yet I was soon to think of other things, for scarce had the great clock struck five when whom should I see in the garden but my lady Marjory — and she was alone.

CHAPTER X

I TALK WITH MY LADY IN THE GARDEN

I saw my lady, and scarce had I seen her when the impulse took me to dress myself and run down to her. I knew well that we had talked but ill yesterday — she being held back by the presence of others; while all that I would have said stuck in my throat when Captain Goulding angered me.

"But now," cried I, "she shall speak her whole heart;" and with this thought quickening my feet, I ran down the stone steps and stood, quite of a sudden, in the path before her.

There be many who say that a woman looks her best when the candles are lit, and she is dressed for mask or play; but this is no opinion of mine. Let me see her, say I, in the first of the morning, when she is rested by her sleep, and the dew sparkles not with the brightness of her eyes, nor the rose-leaves

shame her cheeks in the blush. Long years had come between that yesterday when I was returned to Marjory again and the day she had given me "Good-bye" at Warboys; but I had been too strong in my tempers last night to think of anything but her hard saying; and must wait for this morning hour to see how the years had dealt with her, and how pretty she was now grown. Nay, with her womanhood she had put on the riper beauty, yet thereby she lost nothing of that which pleased most in her girlhood; and when I saw her now in the garden reading from a book — I knew not what — I vowed that no fairer woman was to be found in all the world.

I came into the garden, and scarce had shut the gate behind me when she heard my step upon the path, and closed her book quickly. She was near by a bush of white roses then; and when she saw who it was walking toward her, she began to pick the petals of the flowers, and there was a little flush of the blood to her face. For my part, I thought only of my servant's coat — and, Lord! never was man so shamed of his clothes as Hugh Peters in that moment. As I live, they

seemed to put a great gulf 'twixt me and her; and the ready word stuck to my tongue when I looked, first at them and then at the laces about her throat, and the shining pearls upon her neck.

"Lord," said I, "that I should have this humiliation upon me!"

Speech stuck upon my tongue, I say, and she it was who first spoke, yet not kindly, as I had hoped, but proudly, as a mistress to one who must obey.

"Well, Master Peters," she said, "and what brings you abroad at this hour?"

"My lady," said I, for I dared not yet to call her Marjory, "my lady, is there any need to ask me that? Nay, surely, we have walked at the dawn too often together that we should put the question one to the other — why is it?"

She crushed a rose leaf in her hands, and turned away her head, as though looking to find others in the garden.

"You are pleased to remind me of your father's charity, Master Peters," she exclaimed presently. "Oh, be assured, I am not like to forget that, as you yourself shall bear witness, since you are here safeguarded in the castle of

Windsor, when you might very well have been in the hands of the King's Guards at Epping —"

"My lady," said I, for I was angered with her, "have shame to say that. You know well that never was I one to speak of that which my father did in friendship. Such kindness as you have shown to me — if, indeed, it were a kindness to bring me to this place at all — for that I thank you dutifully. Yet how I am safeguarded here among the King's men, where twenty may remember Hugh Peters, is a thing you have yet to teach me. Nay, it seems to me that had you sought my undoing, you could not have set about it in a prettier way —"

I spoke in much temper, losing myself in the heat of it, at which she drew herself up mighty proud.

"If that was your thought, Master Peters," said she, "where was your prudence, then, that you are here at all?"

"Oh," cried I, my heart beating with longing for her, "you can ask that — you, the little Marjory that played with me at Warboys."

Her face flushed quite crimson at the ques-

tion, and she looked all about her to see that none listened.

"Hush, hush, Hugh," cried she, "this is no time to speak so — you know not what it means — I command you, talk not to me of that again."

"Marjory," said I, for the pain it gave was easy to be understood by me, "trouble yourself not at all that I forget how I stand before you, nor think that I do not know very well why you would close my lips. Oh, believe me, if Hugh Peters' memory can minister to your happiness, you shall find it obedient as a child. He remembers nothing; he bids you act and speak as though Warboys had never been, nor them that lived in it."

Her confusion at this, — it might be her shame, — was very plain to see. As for me, I knew then that she loved this man whom the common tongue had named for her husband; and with my hope all the beauty of the garden seemed to perish before my eyes. I began to say that the sun should not set before I left Windsor, and trusted my poor life again to the God who had brought me through so many perils. And so I would have told her had she not now begun to speak once

more; and to my surprise, with a little laugh which seemed to be in scorn of me.

"Oh, Master Peters," she cried, looking away from me the while, "that you should break the morning with your angers. And that I should be held in argument with you here in the garden where twenty eyes may see. Silly lad, to come from your room at all until the King's pardon is gotten by one who will still be your friend — remember or forget as it pleases you to do. Go back now, and hide your face until those who have the right shall summon you to show it. You have my word for it that no harm shall come to you here. Though the Constable himself should know where you lie, yet shall he not put hand upon you until the King be come. Think you that we are children, Sir Nathaniel and I? You must think it."

"Marjory," said I, for her words perplexed me sorely, "I wish to God that we were both children again, with naught before us but our playtime in the park at Warboys."

Her face was grave at this, and she looked up to me with eyes in which I seemed to find something of that which I had waited for all along. But the look passed away on the in

stant, and when she spoke it was not of Warboys.

"Come," she said, with one of her pretty gestures of impatience which I loved to see, "we do well, indeed, to stand here when all the castle is waking. What, Master Hugh, if one should stop to say: 'That great fellow there with the big hands, and the red hair peeping from his fine periwig, — that is Hugh Peters sent from France to make trouble among us.' Nay, look not so angry — they are big, methinks — and oh, my friend, what a picture has a periwig made of you!"

She was laughing openly at me now, and I stood before her, grinding the stones beneath my heel.

"Laugh if it please you," said I, bitterly, "I am as God made me; and I would the sooner be what I am than all the King's pups come out of Paris. There was a day, mistress, when you were well enough pleased that my hands should be big and my arm should be stout — a day when few but Hugh Peters would fetch and carry for the daughter of the great earl that was earl no longer. God be praised, I can now make haste to forget that day, as you have forgotten it."

I spoke the words bluntly, for I said that I would spare her no longer. And I have always thought that my life would have been different had it been given to us to talk a little while longer there in the garden of the keep. But that was not to be, for while she had the word of answer upon her lips, Captain Goulding came through the gate; and no sooner did she see him than she drew away from me as though in shame that we had been discovered together. As for Sir Nathaniel, he was under no politeness to conceal his anger, and having looked quickly from one to the other, he began to speak his mind upon it.

"God in heaven, Master Peters, what folly is this?" he cried, as he stood before us. "Is your neck then so ready for the noose that you must go seeking the hangman in any place you can find him? Back to your room, man, or, by the Lord, I will wash my hands of so pestilent a fellow on the instant."

I was in no mood to wrestle with him; and without so much as a look at my lady, I went back to my room again.

CHAPTER XI

A MAN STANDING IN THE MOONLIGHT

I HAD been at Windsor five days before I had any feeling of security in my lodging; but when that time was passed, I began to learn how well they had done in choosing a hiding-place for me under the very nose of the King's men. For the matter of that, I saw no face in all the castle that I had ever seen in my life before. The Constable and his fellows were too set upon their own idle pleasures to ask of every serving-man, "whence come you, and whither do you go?" Few of them had been at the wars, or, indeed, had ever heard of my name, much less of my eventful life. My new clothes, and the new fashion of wearing my hair so changed me, that my own kinsman might have been sore tried to say if this were Hugh Peters or no. Above all, I learnt very soon how well my lady Marjory and Sir Nathaniel stood with

the King; and what an overbold man that would have been who set himself to question one enjoying their protection. Sir Nathaniel himself had been given lodgings in the castle as soon as he came over from France; and my lady Marjory had got an apartment there when she was made one of the Duchess's women. As for me, they gave it out that I was brought from Paris to be servant to my lady; and this was the beginning and the end of the talk about me.

Five days I had been in the castle, I say, yet I heard or saw nothing of the King, nor of any the jades who followed his steps. As for the Duchess, she was at the castle; but only waiting word for the Duke's quitting of his ship, when she was to go with her ladies to meet him at Greenwich. I did not fail to reckon with the day when I must be left alone in Windsor with Sir Nathaniel again; and that day I knew would be little to my content. Nay, every finger pointed to my lady and to this man as them who were soon to be husband and wife; every tongue spake of their amours. I had never such shame nor bitterness in my life as when I went to play my part in little Marjory's rooms; and must see

this fine dog of Paris so carrying himself that all the world might learn what he would do presently. Twice every day I stood in the antechamber, for the play's sake; and, Lord, what a humility to see them pass me by as though I had been, indeed, a serving-man, and she was never my playmate at Warboys! Not once, I vow, in all those hours, save when we talked in the garden, did she so much as seem to remember that I lived — not once did she turn her eyes upon me nor speak a word of greeting. Well enough to say, as this rogue of France said often to me, that it was for my safety's sake. I knew well that no woman would have so treated a man that was in her heart's keeping; and I lay awake the night long, telling myself that I must love her ever, even though she forgot that Hugh Peters had lived to plague her. And this, I vow, was the darkest hour of my life.

There had been rain upon my fifth day at Windsor, and after I had taken supper with Captain Goulding, — as often I did, for it was his abiding love to talk of Paris with me, and chiefly of pretty Madame Keroualle, whom I had known there as waiting-woman to the Duchess of Orleans, — after I had taken sup-

per, I say, I went to my room in the Devil's Tower and got quickly into my bed. I could hear the note of fiddle and hautbois over in my lady's apartment; and once I caught sight of her speaking to them that sat at a card-table. Her dress was mighty rich that night, I remember, and her pretty brown hair lay spread saucily upon the whitest neck man ever clapped eyes upon. I thought that she looked nigh as young then as when first I had left her to go to my father at Scheveling; nay, it seemed to me that she was still a child in the haste and carelessness of her speech, and in love of all those plaguing tricks which ill become the mistress. And this brought me to remember that a child won is but a woman to be woo'd. Lord, said I, that I should think the old jest gave me the right to be before others with her!

I lay long awake that night, dreaming again, as I had done when first I came to Windsor, that a man watched me while I slept. It was an ill dream, for it woke me from my sleep with such a start that I must sit bolt upright in my bed, and rub my eyes like a lad scared by a bogle. At first I thought that day had come, so mellow was the light of the moon's

beams shining in the tower; but when my sight was cleared, and I had begun to ask what waked me, I became aware, all on the instant, that a man, ill-dressed, but of great stature, was standing quite close to my bed and watching me. I could see him as plainly as though the sun had been up and day with us; and while a great felt hat was drawn over his eyes, it did not hide from me the pointed beard and the long curling hair of a cavalier man; nay, the fellow was laughing as he stood; and though his hand was upon the hilt of his sword and his eyes were never turned away from my face, he wore rather the air of a jester than of one bent upon an ill deed.

I watched the man, it might be for a minute, and then, with a quickness he had never looked to see, I sprang from my bed and made to reach my sword. It was lying with my clothes upon an old oaken bench beneath the window of the tower, and I must cross the room to get it, — a thing he had waited for, since he, taken on a sudden as he was, could yet make a move to come between me and the window. And this he did, kicking me upon my naked shin with

his heavy boot so that I cried out at the hurt, and fell headlong upon the floor. The next instant, his sword was pricking my breast, and I lay trembling with the sweat of death.

"Lie still, you devil's cub," he snarled, "for as God lives you are going to sing your psalms in hell."

He pricked me the more at this, and I could feel the blood trickling down my chest. His sword seemed to be searching for my very heart.

"Now, Hugh Peters," he went on presently, yet never once taking the steel from my flesh, "how dost feel now? Hast said thy prayers? Ho, ho, that they should bring thee into Windsor, thinking that none would see through thy pretty French wig! 'T was a good day, for me, by my life, that am but a poor soldier."

It was horrible to me to hear the man laugh so; yet as I lay looking up into his face, I could find no hope of mercy there.

"Oh, my God," cried I aloud, "he means to kill me."

"True, Hugh Peters," he answered, with another mocking laugh, "when yon ray of

the moon's light shall fall upon thy face, I will even stick thee like a pig. Whisper a word of prayer then, and have a care 't is but a whisper. God's mercy! are there not five hundred guineas upon thy head? Think you that I will call the guard and share them with another! Nay, I am no such simpleton."

Death is very cruel when he holds us long in talk and makes no haste to strike us. As I lay upon that stone floor, I seemed to die ten times; and yet death did not come to me. Though he had bidden me pray to my God, and I would tell myself that this was the moment when I should know the eternal, I could bring no prayer to my lips. Only the thought of the hurt which the steel would give me when presently he plunged it to my heart came to me. Nay, I asked myself, why does he hold his hand? and at this, I scanned his face again, but could read nothing there.

The ray of the moon was, perhaps, a hand's breadth from my head when he bade me pray. I watched it now, yet had not the wish that it should be held back, but only that it might touch my face swiftly.

And never did moon's light creep on so timidly.

"Lord," I exclaimed, "let it be swift to come, that I may have no pain of it." And to him I made the same prayer.

"Do your work now — why hold your hand?" I gasped.

"Nay," said he, watching me curiously, "I have promised thee a minute for prayer, Hugh Peters, and I am a man of my word."

At this saying he cut me again a little with his sword; but as he slit my flesh, I divined a tremor of the sword in his hand; and I knew then why he did not strike on the instant. Like many a man put to the trial, he could not bring himself to kill me. His arm, which had been strong in the plan, failed him in the action. He touched my flesh, and was frightened as a woman when the blood ran out upon my naked breast. Had I cried out but once for help, the call would have nerved him to my death. It was even possible that when the moon's beam fell upon my face, it would compel him to strike as he had promised.

There is no pain which man can bear sur-

passing the pain from the wounds of steel. So sore cut was I now, that I gnashed my teeth to hush the cry upon my lips; and the nails of my fingers were torn as they sought to clutch the stone of the floor. This he saw, and it seemed to frighten him the more.

"Dost fear death, lad?" he asked. "Nay, we all fear it. Yet, surely, will I kill thee, for there are five hundred guineas upon thy head. Oh, that will be wealth to me, Hugh Peters, who am but a poor soldier. Did I spare thee, others would share it, and God knows what I might get. Nay, I must kill thee — when the time be come."

He spoke with so plain a ring of pity in his voice that I was emboldened to plead with him again.

"Show me mercy for the love of God," cried I, "and you shall not want five hundred guineas. I have friends here, as you must know. Speak to Sir Nathaniel Goulding, and he will deal with you."

It was an unlucky word, and he answered it quickly.

"What," he said, "the French spy pay

money to save thy neck! That is a fine thing to hear. Surely, he would give five hundred guineas to know that thou wert dead — as thou wilt be now on the instant. God forgive me, there is moon's light upon thy face."

It was as he said. The beam fell blindingly upon my eyes; nevertheless I saw him draw back a step to strike me, and I put my arm upon my bleeding chest, that the steel should first cut that. Twice he raised his hand; twice he could not bring himself to the blow; yet at every motion I had the terror of death in my heart, and at last I could bear with it no longer, but screamed aloud in my agony. Never was such a sorry assassin born as this man who had the mind, but not the hand, to kill me.

"Devil," he cried, "would you bring the guard! God's life, I will close —"

He had the will now to strike me, I make sure, but the word he went to utter gurgled suddenly upon his lips, and with a horrid sound gulping in his throat, he fell headlong across my knees.

A man, whose very eyes were muffled up in a black coat, had stabbed him as he stood,

and so hard was the long dagger driven that it stuck out from his heart even, and cut my knee when he fell upon me. And at that the whole room swam before my eyes, and I fainted.

CHAPTER XII

I SEE THE BLAZING STAR

A GREAT star blazed in the heavens, — a star of transcendent lights, floating in a cloud of golden spray. Swift it seemed to go, so that the other stars hid their faces, and all the mighty vault of the night was emblazoned with the fires which the big star shed. I watched it long, lying upon my back, and saying surely that I was in a boat upon the sea; and that all the waters must be tossing the gold foam from the blazing planet above me. Or, closing my eyes for a little while, I told myself that I had been carried up from the earth to the mysteries of God, and that all the air was full of the jewels which fall from the throne of Him that was, and is, and is to be.

I saw the star, and then a sleep of weakness held my mind again. When I awoke for the second time, the heavens were still full of the

dazzling light, and a rain of gold appeared showering at the zenith. But now I knew that my dream of death was a silly one; and that I, indeed, lived upon the earth, as distant as ever I was from the City of the Eternal. Nay, I would have lifted my hand, but it was bound close to my side; and when my mind had gone wandering yet a little while longer, it was restored to me all on an instant; and I could say that I was roped to the back of a horse, and that the horse carried me through a forest. In which way had this ridiculous thought — that I was in a boat — come to me?

If we be very weak from wounds or sickness, we are often content to rest and to ask naught of the place we rest in or of them that have brought us to it. And so was it with me when I awoke upon the horse's back, and lay long looking up at the branches above me, and at the great blazing star shining with such fiery lights upon the slender tracery of the blossoming trees. Though I had burning pain at my chest, and my feet were benumbed with aching cold, I was content for a little while to be rocked by the sway of the saddle, and to remember nothing of the earlier night and of the peril which I had passed. Only

when the horse was put, of a sudden, to the trot, and my wounds seemed about to burst again with the pressure of the ropes, did I recall the dreadful hour in my bed-chamber at Windsor, and the death of him who had wished to compass my death. Then I must have cried out aloud, for one answered me immediately, and presently a man bent over my saddle and looked at me, and I saw the veiled face of him that had struck down the cavalier.

He was still wrapped all about in his great black coat, but his eyes shone bright between the folds of it, and his voice, while harsh as the croak of a marsh bird, was not lacking kindness.

"Hush, Master Peters," he said in some kindness, "bear with it a little while, and then I will ease thee. 'T is better to laugh at thy cuts than to dance with the hangman. Another hour and we will do better for thee."

"Who are you?" cried I, groaning again, for he was whipping my horse now. "Who are you, and whither do you carry me?"

"Canst ask that," he exclaimed, "after what I did in thy chamber? Nay, hold thy tongue, man. We ride in the forest of Wind-

sor, and the Constable and twenty of his men are at our heels. God send the dawn soon, or we shall never see another."

With this he fell to lashing his own horse, and he called to another in his company not to spare whip or spur.

"Dost hear them, Tom Robinson?" he bawled, "dost hear them? A plague upon this swinish thicket! Lord, that I should lose my way — I, that know the forest like my own devil's face."

There was a moment of silence after this; but presently the man, whoever he was, answered, as it seemed to me, from some distant place of the copse through which we rode.

"Ay, Master Israel, I hear them, and, by ——, they have loosed the hounds."

My guide swore a great oath when the words were uttered, and pushed still deeper into the brake. I could hear already the deep baying of the hounds in the forest behind us, and so great was my fear that I raised myself a little from my horse, and looked round at him who rode with me. His cloak had fallen back from his face now, but when he turned to speak, remembrance both of my situation

and of the hounds passed away, and I called out again for very terror. He had the face not of a man, but of a devil, as he said; and no vulture was ever such an ill thing to look upon as this guide in whose keeping my life lay.

For a truth, it was a horrid sight to see, and many minutes passed and found me lying quite still upon my horse's back, silent for very fear of the face. I knew that the man had heard me call out, and I looked for some stern word of answer from him; but he gave me none, speaking gently, as, indeed, he ever did, and encouraging me rather to think of the peril from which we fled.

"God's truth, you show little liking for me, Master Peters," cried he; "yet I doubt not you will find me better company than yon hounds. Hark! dost hear them baying? They bark for blood; and blood they will get if my eyes do not lead me to the road again. Lord, that Israel Wolf should lose his way within a mile of Windsor town!"

It is an odd thing to tell, but the words of this man, whose face I could not bear to look upon, were always words of seeming friendship. Weak and sick as I was, I said that I

would sooner stand with him than with the enemies I had left in the castle behind me. Yet what he would do, or how turn the peril, I knew no more than the dead; and I lay back upon my saddle, shutting my eyes that I might not see his face, but content already to believe that he meant well to me.

We had drawn rein now at the brink of a burn whose waters I could hear tumbling and splashing upon a pebbly bed. There was a beautiful stillness of the night here; the shadow of the trees so hid us that we looked out, as from a bower of darkness, upon the groves all lit by the full light of the moon at her zenith. The hounds were still baying from the heart of the distant brake; and anon they drew so close that foxes ran from the copse, and hinds galloped, all mad together, through the tangle of the thicket. I could hear the winding of horns and the loud shouts of men from the more open meadows of the park. The whole forest awoke, as it were, to the note of this emprise, so that we appeared to be surrounded by them that pursued us; and every moment brought their cries more clearly to us, the ring of voices was drawn the closer at every tick of time.

I have written that we had drawn rein a moment at the burn; and though that looked a mad thing to do, I was yet so willing to trust the men who had carried me thither in safety that I made no complaint, but waited for them while they rode, now up, now down the stream, searching upon the opposite bank for some path which, I made sure, was a way to shelter both from the dogs and those that used them. Once, indeed, I thought to hear the tread of a man quite close to my horse's quarters, but I dared not call to Master Wolf; and before there was another sound, he rode up to me again, crying that he had found the path. More he did not say, for the words were still upon his lips when the bushes behind us opened with a great snapping of twigs, and a hound and two men sprang out together. I saw the brute leap up, foam dripping from his jaws, and so quick was he to get at his work that he fell short by a yard of the mark he sprang at, and his teeth shut with a horrid snap upon the throat of Master Wolf's horse. It was pitiful, I vow, to hear the poor beast snorting with his pain, and so put to it, in fear of the hound, that he went rolling backward into the burn, and the deep waters of

the stream splashed upon the three of them. As for the men who had followed the dog, they cared nothing for Master Wolf nor his safety; but directly they clapped eyes upon me, bound there upon the horse, they ran forward with a loud halloaing, and called, one to the other, that the quarry surely was taken.

"It is Hugh Peters, by the Lord," exclaimed the first, while he put his hands roughly upon my throat. "Hugh Peters, and no other. I could pick him from a hundred. What! you mind my touch, man? Out on you for a pretty spy, with the noose already about your dog's neck!"

His hands were busy now with the ropes which bound me; and while his companion called to him to go gently, as the Constable commanded, he made merry with it; and soon had dragged me from my horse and set me on my legs, though I reeled like a man drunk with wine, and the wound in my leg burst again so much that the blood ran down into my boot.

"Now," roared he, thrusting me from the saddle to which I would have clung, "stand up, you psalm-singing devil — do you hear me!

God's truth, you shall dance right merrily presently, when they swing you from yon tree. Have no fear, Master Peters; I will even read you the burial myself."

With this he thrust me away from him again, and I thought that I must fall headlong upon the grass of the knoll. All the trees about me were rocking to my sight now; my head swam with horrid giddiness; and only hatred of this man, who stood there and pointed the finger at me, kept me upon my legs.

"God!" I cried, "if I might hold a sword in my hand before I die."

"Nay, Hugh Peters," said he, "I will deny you nothing. You have my word for it. No sooner shall you dangle from yonder branch than I will even lend you my own blade. What, to refuse a man with a rope round his neck! That would be a shabby sin."

It was all a fine taunt, and he laughed to see me so helpless before him, — my eyes misted, and my wound bleeding anew. And this taunt I think it was that saved me then. A great passion and anger against him filled my veins, on a sudden, as with the strength

of two men; and I struck him with my clenched hand full in the face — so heavy a blow that he reeled backward from me with all his senses gone. His companion, who had stood silent while we talked, turned upon me savagely when he saw what was done; but before he could put a hand to my throat, I heard him utter a loud cry — and crying still, he sank upon the grass. Master Wolf — come, I know not how, from the burn — had stabbed him as he stood; and the dagger was not drawn from the wound before he who held it bade me get again upon my horse.

"Up, man, up!" he cried, helping me with both his lusty arms; "we shall have a whole company out upon us if you show no better haste. Hold to the bridle as best you may. Dost thou hear them shouting? Wolves tear their reedy throats! Once across the burn we will draw rein to laugh at them. There was never hound yet to pass blood that Israel Wolf knew. And, God's word, you bleed like a torn stag."

He had forced me into the saddle while he was speaking, and, springing up behind me, he held me firm with his right arm, while with his left he took the rein and put

the horse at the water. Already in the brake behind us we heard the tread of men and the music of hounds, deep, sonorous, and threatening. I knew that it was a race for life; yet so did I abhor the touch of Israel Wolf that, had the strength been mine, I believe I had thrown myself to the ground and there have faced them that tracked me. But the more I sought to free myself from his strong embrace, the closer did he grip me; and, muttering to himself strange words I could make nothing of, he forced the jaded horse through the burn, and the bushes closed behind us as we passed. We had struck a bridle path that appeared to carry us down to the very pit of the forest.

For ten minutes, perhaps, Master Wolf kept the horse at the top of his speed. Then he let him go at a walk, seeming to think that we had reason for haste no longer.

"The plague burn their bodies!" he cried savagely; "let them follow an it please them. There was never born yet the man who could track Israel Wolf when he had his feet upon the right road. Dost hear them roaring up at the brook yonder? I told you that no hound would pass blood. Nay, bear with my touch

a little yet — and you shall see me no more. I ask nothing of you, Master Peters. God knows, I bear my own burden and expect nothing of any man."

There was a world of bitterness in his voice, and yet a great kindness. I could distinguish the distant note of shouting in the wood; but it was plain that the dogs had not passed the burn, and that I owed my life to this very man whose touch was abhorrent to me, and the sight of whose face made me shudder with loathing. Nay, I tried to thank him, but the speech stuck in my throat; and, weaker still from my wound, I sank back close in his arms, and he held me at last as a woman may hold a child.

And so the day came cold and chill through the tangle of the forest; and with the first warming ray of the sun I fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

WILL MONK HAS A WORD WITH ME

My sleep was broken by many dreams, but chiefly by dreams of Master Wolf and of great kindness put upon me by him. I thought that I lay in a woodlander's hut, and that my guide was ever at my bedside, dressing my wounds or pressing cooling drink upon me. Or again I rode with him through meadows and woods, he holding me upon a horse as he had done in the night of the peril at Windsor; and when that vision passed, I sat in a coach at the dark of the moon, and Master Wolf watched me, being close to me against my will. Nor did I know that all these things were not of my sleep, but, indeed, true happenings, as I was to learn afterwards.

If these memories be but misted like a sheet of glass upon which a man has breathed, the moment of my ultimate awakening is very plain in my mind. I remember well that there was a ray of the sun's light burning

strong upon my eyes when I opened them, and then, after I had raised myself in my bed, I found myself in a room of some size; but so poor a place that I had the thought to be in jail. Walls, which dripped with wet, seemed to fill the whole chamber with their choking dampness. The floor was rough and broken; the carved oaken chimney all tumbling down from the rottenness of the supports; the glass of the window cracked and half hidden by boards nailed over it. Save one chair of a shabby shape, and the poor thing of a bed upon which I lay, the apartment lacked any sort of ornament; nor was there so much as a cup of water set by my bed for my comfort. As for my clothes, they were partly laid upon me to give me warmth, but my boots stood out in the centre of the great bare floor, and the blood which had run down from my leg had left a great black stain which was plain to be seen.

I was mighty weak at my first awakening, and sweat broke freely from my body; for the day was one of exceeding heat, and the sun burned like fire. Though I had no pain from my wound, I suffered bitterly from thirst, and so little was this to be borne that I got out of

my bed at last and limped, as well as might be. to the door — hoping to make some servant hear me. I found that my room was one of a number opening upon the landing of a square hall of noble size; a hall which was once, I make sure, very fine to see. But now it was as ill-kept as the room I had left. Oaken boards, often chipped and stained; panelling which had been pulled from the walls so that, here and there, the bricks thrust themselves upon your view; a few pictures hanging crookedly from a rod beneath the mouldy frieze, — all spoke of the past of riches and the present of decay. Even the beautiful window of painted glass, which shed a lustre of pretty lights upon the dingy woodwork, wanted many a figure ere it would tell the legend again. In truth, the sun's rays came flooding through the broken panes of it, drawing a golden circle upon the rotting floor, and searching every nook and cranny in the path of their shining bow. They lit up a scene of loneliness and desolation like to none I have ever beheld. In all that great place, which once, surely, was the house of princes, no sound was to be heard, no human thing to be observed. I opened two of the doors near to

mine upon the landing; but the rooms which I entered were as bare as dungeons. Vast and once splendid as they must have been, their painted ceilings were now gone to ugly daubs of running colour; the tapestries hung raggedly upon their walls; their windows were broken; their flooring but so much food for rats. The very air in them was a poisoned odour to the nostrils, and, in my sick state, went near to choking me when I breathed it. Nay, I made haste, as well as I could, to get me out of them; and, fatigued beyond endurance with the paltry effort, I lay again on my own bed, and watched the day waxing to its zenith.

Many thoughts, you may be sure, came to trouble my mind in that hour of thirst and weakness and desertion. Where was Israel Wolf, I asked again and again? Odd to tell, I hungered for the company of that man with the devil's face. Never in all my life had I met with one who inspired me with emotions so contrary — now of abhorrence of his face, now of trust in his friendship. I saw that if he had brought me to this house of ruin, he had done it for my safety's sake. Full well I knew what a hue and cry would be set up for

me about Windsor now. I remembered the two men that had died — and told myself that there, at last, was a long good-day to all the fair lands of my promises. Never again could I hope to see her whom I loved — oh, beyond all that was on earth. Henceforth, I must be the quarry of all that knew me and cared for the pastime of the hunt. My lady would marry the man who had professed himself to be my friend. Lord, cried I, what a proud word of my conceit was that when I called her wife! And then I fell to thinking of her prettiness in the garden, and of the strange word she spoke there; a word of friendship and yet not of friendship, a memory of the old time at Warboys — yet a memory choked before her lips could fashion it.

This, and much more besides, was the plaything of my mind during the long afternoon of that burning day. Though I was devoured by thirst so that my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth, and I would have cooled it even against the glass of the window, no one answered to my call nor moved in the deserted house. Once, when the sun began to wane, I heard the report of a musket from some place near the window;

and the bells of a neighbouring church struck the hours and the quarters, so that I had the time and could count the weary minutes until night fell. But it was not until six of the clock that any one came to me; and I had fallen again to a broken sleep then. So strong, nevertheless, was the thirst upon me that at the first sound of a footfall in the chamber I opened my eyes, and saw that a man stood at my bedside. He was very plainly dressed in a suit of brown stuff, with silver buttons upon his coat and black ribbons at his knees; and his manner was that of a serving-man grown old in the practice of servilities until they had become an abiding habit with him. I observed that he had the flat face and the shaven chin which, I know not why, we find often in them that tend horses. His hair was very dark and cut short, but not after the manner in which the Lord's men wear it. There was a smile ever upon his face; the smile of a man who was born into the world laughing at man's follies, and will go out of it still amused by them; and he never once forgot to laugh when he spoke to me.

"Sir," said he, while I continued to search

him with my eyes, "I thought that I heard you call me."

I answered his question with another.

"Where is Master Wolf?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he did not know.

"I am not his keeper," said he, "and if I were, he should not be at the King's house in the village of Hampstead."

I thought upon his answer a little while, and then I said, —

"Whose house is this, and why am I here?"

"Sir," said he, very civilly, "you are in the house of Sir Nathaniel Goulding, and I am here to do your bidding. I trust that you will find me in all things a worthy servant."

My hope sank very low while I heard this, and I remained silent when the clock might have ticked ten. It seemed to me that I was trapped as surely as a rabbit in a snare.

"Well," cried I at last, observing that he waited for me to speak, "what thanks I owe to Captain Goulding shall be paid presently. I knew not even that he had a place at

Hampstead; much less that it was so fine a place as this."

The meaning of my word was not to be hidden from him, and he continued to smile neither more nor less than he had done when first I saw him.

"Oh," said he, "as for the place, it is a poor sort of place enough, Master Peters; that I will not deny. But it is better, I swear, than the jail at Newgate, as you might think if the King's men laid hands upon you. Are you not among friends here?"

"Friends!" cried I.

"Ay, surely," said he, with a sneer which was not to be overlooked by me, "friends, Master Peters, as I hope you will say presently. For the matter of that, you may command me in anything. I have Sir Nathaniel's orders, and I know how to obey."

"Well," said I, "if you have any mind to serve me, for God's sake bring me water to drink and a little food."

"That you shall have this very minute," cried he; "my master is sorry enough to have no shelter for you but such as you may find in this old house. It was once

a gay place, as you may think, sir; but Sir Nathaniel has been long in France, and wind and weather bide no man's absence. Still, you will make shift with it, I don't doubt, until the road be clear, and a ship found to carry you to France."

"To France!" exclaimed I.

"Ay," said he, "to France or the Low Countries, if you have the mind. England is no place for you now, Master Peters. Why, they tell it everywhere, how you went cloaked into Windsor to lay your hands on the Constable's money, and then stuck Jack Hawkins as though he had been a pig. He would be a bold man who would ask pardon for that night's work."

He looked at me very closely, thinking, I suppose, that this saying would fire me to some heat of speech; but I had begun to judge both him and his master now; and all the devilish net they weaved about me stirred me to new resources. I was ever obstinate under misfortunes; and my misfortunes pressed upon me sorely in that hour. But to the serving-man I made no complaint, asking only for water to quench my burning thirst.

"How do they call you?" I inquired, as he turned to leave the room.

"They call me Will Monk," cried he.

"The Lord find me a sword that I may yet quicken your steps," thought I. And so I lay listening to his tread upon the creaking stair.

CHAPTER XIV

I SEE LONDON FROM AFAR

Though Will Monk had found for my supper no better fare than a cup of water and a little bread and fruit, he promised that he would do better for me in the morning; and when day came, he kept his word so far as to bring me a draught of milk and a dish of meat — but Lord, so poor and ill-cooked that only my hunger drove me to eat of it. Nevertheless, I had some return of strength when it was down; and while I was exceeding lame and my wound still very sore, I yet had the will to get up from my bed, and walk to the window, that I might look out upon the distant city. As for Monk, he had gone to bed with a laugh upon his cunning face; and with a laugh he stood beside me now when he pointed out to me all that he wished me to see in the prospect.

"Yonder, sir," said he, pointing to a low

cloud of mist upon the farther side of the wood which sheltered a few houses in its heart — as I could tell by the loom of the smoke above the trees — "yonder, sir, is London city, as I will show you when the wind has lifted the cloud a little. You can see Paul's as plain as your hand if the day be bright; and we clock by Bow Bells should there be no time in the village."

The air was very sweet at the open window; and I soon discovered in what kind of a situation this King's house lay. It was built upon the east side of the hill at Hampstead; and a great green wood girded it about, so that you see nothing of the village in the vale, but only the mighty city which lay in the distant valley as a kernel may lie in a nut. Or, looking out from the back of the house, the spire of Harrow church was plainly to be seen, with the long ridge of heights where Barnet is; and beyond Barnet, the town of St. Albans. Nearer to my view was the squat tower of the church at Hampstead, with a line of houses upon either side — very tall and built of brick, but with no prettiness, to my mind. Yet had I good words of praise for the old garden which was a part of Sir

Nathaniel's place; and so sweet with gilly-flowers and wild thyme and bushes of scented roses that the air was ever warmed with its delicious perfumes. A great wall ran round this wooded haven of blossoms; and I was quick to observe that what the French call a *chevaux-de-frise* was set upon the top of it, while the gate was well spiked with iron, and twice barred against any that would pass out. But whether it was so barred against a possible attack from an enemy or as a measure for my better security was not to be learnt.

"You show me a fair view, Master Monk," said I, when we had stood at the window a little while, "yet if I were your master I would know better than to let a house like this come to such a state. He has been long in France, you say?"

"He was many years there, to and fro; but not in the Lord-General's day," he answered, readily. "'Tis time, for a truth, that he looked to his own now — as he will do presently, when he has gotten a wife to keep him and the reward of his work. Trust a woman, Master Peters, to hitch the falding to the fee."

He looked full at me when he said this;

but I was as good in play now as he; and I made no manner of sign that he angered me.

"Your master is to marry, then?" I asked, as though I cared nothing for his answer.

"He is to marry the sister of my Lord of Quinton as soon as he has settled this present business which he has in his keeping. And that is like to be difficult enough, with the sickness strong in the city, and the Court soon to be at Salisbury. They tell me this morning that they have buried twenty-nine of the plague in St. Giles, and the bill grows even to the city's gates. It is no day for a man to go to London who has any place of shelter out of it. Why, they begin to lumber the roads already with their waggons; and the rich are running by like frightened sheep from a pen. A dreadful day, sir, when those that are well at dawn are in the pit before the sun is sunk. God have mercy on us all, I say."

Master Ford had said something to me of the sickness in the city, but not of any overwhelming pestilence such as this; nor could I imagine that things went so ill with us as Will Monk would have it. For the matter of that, the silly laugh ever upon his face, and

his quiet way of speaking, gave no truth to his report, and when we had talked a little while longer upon it — though not with seriousness — I asked him if I might be helped into the garden there to breathe the air. But this he refused me, and he spoke no more as one who obeys, but as the master.

"What," said he, "you would walk where the first gossip may cry upon you? For shame, Master Peters. Is that the way you thank those who risk their life in harbouring you? Out on you for a silly fellow! You shall not leave your room while I have the say on it. 'T would be a fine story to carry to Sir Nathaniel — that the second day of my charge saw you upon the road to Newgate. Let us speak of it no more."

It was very fine to make such a pretence of planning my safety; but I knew, as soon as he had done, that I was a prisoner in the King's house at Hampstead, and when he left me and locked my door behind him — to save me, as he declared, from my follies — no jail-bird could have been caged more surely. For my part, I would the sooner have been in the gigger at Newgate than where I was wanting friends and even decent food; and I began

to learn how clever were the wits that now opposed themselves to mine.

"They fear," said I, "to let me fall into the hands of the King's men lest perchance I should tell some tale of that which I heard in France. And now they have brought me here — for what?"

Nay, I could give but one answer; that they had brought me to my death.

I spent the greater part of that day in my bed — very ill and lonesome, as one whom all the world has left. A great gulf seemed to have opened again between me and the living. I heard, ever and anon, the sound of voices in the woods about the house; the ring of hoofs upon a hard road spoke of men riding in or out of London, to places where they should find good words and company; but for me they had no message. All that was done with where Hugh Peters was concerned. "They will persuade little Marjory it is for my well-being," I said, "and she will believe. Parson Ford will never know that I am not still at Windsor. If it be their intent to make an end of my life, here in this ruin of a house, they can do it without so much as a whisper of talk." Such, indeed, seemed the whole

secret of my journey. Yet I could not forget that if Captain Goulding had desired my life, he might well have left me to the night birds of Epping when he had ridden to carry me out of the forest. The apprehension fitted ill with the fact, and set a new train of doubt busy in my head, so that I feared some greater mystery — I knew not what, but one which was enshrouding my life and shutting me from all that I would well have lived for.

It was sunset when Will Monk returned to me again. I was then famished with hunger, and so gone in thirst that, God knows, I could have lapped water from a gutter very willingly; but when I began to speak of my condition, he made a shifty way for himself, declaring that he was the one who suffered.

"Lord!" said he, "that you should complain to me, who have spent the day walking into London for your better comfort. Think you that such things as you need will be dropped down from heaven upon your bed? I tell you, Master Peters, that he will be a lucky man soon who can find bread for his mouth, let alone a dish of meat and a jug of ale. The whole city talks of nothing but the sickness, and will talk of it the more pres-

ently. Men fall dead in the streets, and few stay to ask what shall I eat or what shall I drink. But such things as were to be had, I have bought for you; and others will come to-morrow to make a change in your room here. Until that be done, try to bear with it, sir, and to remember that it is, after all, a place of friendship."

This was very fair to hear; but when, after so much talk, he set upon my table only a small cup of a very poor ale and a piece of coarse bread with a little meat and some mouldy cheese, I hated him the more for the very excuses he made. And it seemed to me that there was no longer any mystery in my condition.

"As God lives," said I to myself, "their weapon is hunger."

CHAPTER XV

SIR NATHANIEL MAKES AN OFFER

For the best part of a month, as my reckoning goes, I lay a prisoner in the King's house at Hampstead. Twice every day Will Monk came to me with the bread and ale which, he declared, was all that the village could offer him; but he smiled ever when he brought it; and he promised always, as I have heard the Spaniards do, that to-morrow he would have it better for me. Yet to-morrow came, and nothing was done; and each day found me the weaker in my health. Nay, God knows if there be a man that was ever so miserable as Hugh Peters during those days of his captivity within the sound of Bow bells.

Often in the morning would I get up from my bed, and wish that the sickness, which was raging now so terribly without, might strike me dead before the night came again. Hunger and wounds had so worked upon me

that the tears would start to my eyes when I thought upon all that I had suffered and must suffer in that house of cruelties. Had one then come to speak a kind word to me, I know well that I must have wept outright, like a silly woman with her sentiment. And this, I vow, is the punishment of captivity, — that it eats the manhood from the heart, and strikes at that within which is the best of God's gifts. Night and day, sun or cloud, the heat of summer or the cold of winter, the hour of youth and love, the harvest time of age and of the soul's uplifting, — what has the captive to do with these? The very walls build themselves about his heart; his ears are closed to all words but those of freedom; he will worship only the god of his liberty, but that god must first be found.

I say that I had come to believe that they wished to starve me in the King's house; but when the month was past, I knew that such was not their intention; but only to put upon me what poverty they could, and to bring me to great lowness of will and to servility. This I proved for myself upon the very first day of the second month of my imprisonment, when I awoke in the early morning to hear some

clamour in the courtyard below; and, going to my window, whom should I see in the stable-yard but Captain Goulding and two men with him, — all very finely dressed, and their horses white with dust, as though new from some long spell upon the road. Hardly were my eyes fixed upon them, when in came Will Monk, who smiled unctuously while he told me that my breakfast was set in the dining-room below.

"Oh," cried I, "this is a change, indeed — so I am to be freed, Master Monk?"

He raised his hands with the air of one very much astonished.

"Are you not among friends?" exclaimed he. "How can you be otherwise than free? Surely that is a very odd saying, Master Peters."

"You know well what I mean," answered I; "you should have shame to play at this surprise."

He shook his head slowly, as though he did not understand.

"You must speak to my master," said he. "I am the servant, and do as they bid me. You will find Sir Nathaniel below, sir. I am sure that he will hear you readily."

Excusing himself so, he lead the way to the great room, whither I followed him with legs that would scarce bend at the stairs. Sir Nathaniel, very prettily dressed in a suit of blue velvet with boots drawn nearly up to his hips, was resting his elbow upon the mantel of the carved chimney; but when he saw me he advanced quickly, putting out both hands to hold mine; and Lord! meeting me with such a face that he might have been my own brother come home again from the perils of the seas.

"Master Hugh," he cried loudly, "God be praised that I see you again — even though it be in this cockpit of a house. Nay, my lad, give me no thanks. What I have done has been done as much for love of you as for her who made me your friend. And she is well, let me tell you, and would be remembered in affection of you. St. Dennis! that I should return to give her such a poor account of your present condition. Hast seen a surgeon yet? No; then you shall see one this very day. Never did I look upon a face so white."

His tongue ran away with him in this manner for whole minutes together, until he

would have persuaded me that no other in the world meant so well to me as he.

"Captain Goulding," cried I, "your intention may be what you say; but I can judge of it only by your acts and the acts of your servants; and I would have you know that what I suffer is neither my misfortune nor my hurts, but the unkindness they have put upon me here in your house. As God is my witness, no prisoner in Newgate was ever treated so ill — no, nor to food so poor and a bed so beggarly. Let us speak of this first and of our friendship after."

He heard me out, feigning to be so astonished that he could scarce find words to answer me.

"How!" he cried; "you have been treated as you say? God's word, my lad, somebody shall pay for this! Where is Will Morgan — name of the devil; the rogue's back shall smart. To serve a guest of mine as though he were a prisoner — St. Dennis, I want breath for my anger."

His flurry was very pretty; he walking up and down the great room with his cloak flying and his face in a flush, and the manner of him all put about as one in a mighty passion. But

when Will Morgan came — Lord! to hear the comedy they played was as good as one of Killigrew's, though God forgive me for speaking of such a rogue.

"Here you, Morgan — a plague upon your laughing face — listen to what Master Peters has to lay against you. Is it true, man? Be quick, lest I lay my stick upon your back before your tale is told. That a guest of mine should speak so of my friendship!"

Will Morgan looked up at this, and answered him very humbly.

"Sir Nathaniel," said he, "when Master Peters shall be pleased to charge me, then will I answer him."

"Oh," said I, "what need to charge you when for a month or more I have been fed like a jail-bird, and have not known an hour in all those days when I might breathe God's air in your garden. You know well that this is the whole truth of it — the Lord be my judge."

"Sir," he answered, looking down upon the floor of the room very meekly, "if I have given you poor food, there have been days when I have fasted that you might not go wanting. And how shall I make bread, or

find it in the village where men fall dead of the sickness every hour, and each thinks of his own need and not of others. As for that which you charge against me, that I kept you to your room, would you have thanked me to let you walk where the first passer-by might have seen you and gone with his gossip to the Spanish inn yonder? Nay, I am only a poor man, and one who tries to obey them that be set above me. And in all I have sought to act as my master would have wished had he, happily, been here to welcome you."

It was a cunning tale, I swear, and little pleasant for me, seeming, as it did, to give me the wrong of it, and make me out an ungrateful fellow. Sir Nathaniel, moreover, was swift to have the advantage of it.

"You hear, Master Peters," said he; "it is as I thought. Yon good fellow has gone fasting that you might eat, and now you turn upon him. He speaks well when he tells of men falling dead from the plague, like dried leaves from a tree. The whole city is full of the story. It is nothing but death, turn where you will. Every second man asks himself if he have the spots upon him. What can we do for you in times like these? *Dame*,

it is a day to thank God for life and to think nothing of our bellies."

Though I knew that I had the right of it, I could make no answer to such a plain tale; and when he had offered many apologies for the state of his house — called the King's house, as he showed me, because the Spanish King Philip had passed one night there — we sat down to a good enough breakfast. This dining-room was not gone to seed like many of the other rooms in the house, but had oaken furniture, prettily carved, while the floor of it was matted, and many big pictures hung upon its walls. I found the captain mighty pleasant over a cup of canary wine, which warmed my body like a cordial water, and when I had sat with him long, listening to his good sayings and his jests, I was almost of the mind to think that I judged him ill when I doubted of his honour, and that, after all, he might prove my friend. And it was then that he broached his plan to me.

"Master Peters," he cried of a sudden, as though it were a notion just come to him, "have you any fancy to go to France again?"

"Sir," said I quickly, for I divined his pur-

pose instantly, "you do not blame me because I love my own country?"

"Not at all, not at all," he exclaimed with a friendly touch of his hand upon my shoulder, "the misfortune is that your country loves you so little. Nay, if she could but discover you, there would be a hanging upon the day. It is not to be hidden from you, friend, that they make more talk about this prying rogue which honest Israel Wolf greeted at Windsor than a company of guardsmen slain in a brawl."

"Israel Wolf is known to you, then?" I asked.

"*Sang bleu!* known to me? He is my *alter ego*, my servant of servants. And he should be very well known to you also, since he, and he alone, brought you out of Windsor at my bidding. That, however, is neither here nor there. The question you have to ask yourself is, whether you would the sooner play the gentleman in France with guineas in your pocket, or remain here in England where the first greedy rogue who learns of your resting-place may sell you to the Constable. I will not disguise it from you that there was a time when I, and those who have your interests at

heart, looked to get the King's pardon for you. That hope has passed now when this new charge is on every tongue, and a thousand guineas are offered for you, dead or alive —"

"They offer that!" cried I. "Then God help me."

"Ay," said he, "it is a thing which might bring a stronger man than you to his knees. Happily, Master Peters, your friends are likely to have more last in them than your tempers. They come to you now with this fair word, that you shall be carried out of England to Madame de Pontac's house in Paris, where a home and a hundred guineas for your pocket await you. There is a condition, of course —"

"Which is —?" I asked.

"That you pledge your honour not to set foot out of France until I give you leave."

He leant across the table when he made his offer, and betrayed a little, I thought, of his earnest wish that I should make the bond good upon the spot. On my part a great suspicion of him came rushing upon my mind to delay the word. One saying, and one alone, guided me: "They would put the sea between me and my little wife," I thought. And this it

was which drove the answer at last from my lips.

"Captain Goulding," said I, "for the offer of your help, I thank you, but I will stay in England, though my life be the forfeit."

I said the thing hotly and with a burning face, and for a moment we two looked, the one at the other, as though to read the mind to the end. Then he rose from his chair, and with no sign given of anger or of regret, he took his farewell.

"Master Peters," said he, laughing pleasantly, "you will be of another mood presently. I will return when ten days are gone, to have your answer. The offer is new to you, and you need to weigh it well. In the meantime, count me your friend."

He held out his hand, and I took it, though, God knows, in my heart I could have wished nothing so much as to see him fall dead at my feet.

CHAPTER XVI

MY LADY MARJORY COMES TO HAMPSTEAD

Of the ten days which Captain Goulding had given me in which to consider his proposition, nine were passed before anything happened in the King's house new enough to remain in my memory. I had thought to be a prisoner no more after that which passed between us at the breakfast table. But what a game of trickery and cunning they played upon me then! No sooner was I awake next day than I found the door of my room to be locked as before; and when Will Monk came to me, he had the same shabby dole of bread and bacon for my breakfast, and the same excuse upon his lying lips. Nor did I argue with him at all, for my affair appeared to be at its head now; and I could well suffer for ten days that which I had suffered for a month and more already.

Nine days came and went, I say, and found me ever busy with the offer which had been made to me. Often I would lie the whole night through, listening to the strange cries and groans which came up from the wood about the house — for many lay dying in the fields now with the dreadful sickness I had been told of — and I would ask myself what kept me in England when I might be a free man in Paris and jingle guineas in my pocket with the best of them? I knew well that she whom I had, in folly, called my wife, cared no longer what course I took. I said that all she had done had been done because my father gave her shelter in the old time. It was flung to me as one would fling bread to a beggar. Did I go to France at the bidding of her friend, she would boast to all the world, "I saved his life," and that she would account payment. Or, if I braved Captain Goulding's threats, she would cry, "He gave himself up for the folly's sake." But being rid of me, she would marry to her greater content, and, it might be, would lay in his arms before the ship had carried me to France.

The perplexity which raged in my mind when I set these alternatives clear before me

is one which no pen may tell. Often my prayers turned to oaths upon my lips when I flung myself against the door of my prison; or remembered what little strength I had, either of mind or body, to pit against my enemies. One day, indeed, I stood at my window, and, looking down fifty feet to the court below, a voice cried in my ear, "Throw thyself and make an end." And I believe that I had done so but for a sudden vision of her I loved, standing between me and the hell which opened at my feet.

This was upon the morning of the tenth day, — a day when, looking out of my window towards the hill where is Finchley Common, I saw a great number of tents, and of people camping by the roadside — all, I did not doubt, fled out of the city for fear of the sickness. It was very early in the morning then, but the bells of Hampstead church had not struck six of the clock before Will Monk came in to tell me that breakfast would be set in the great dining-room, and that his master was to ride over from Whitehall at the top of the morning.

"He goes to Salisbury to-day," said he, "and would settle your affair before he leaves.

It 's no business of mine, Master Peters, but I am friend enough to you to be glad that all this is coming to an end. I am sure you do very well to go to Paris, as my lady will tell you presently."

"How," cried I, "others come in with your master?"

"Ay, surely," said he, "my lady Marjory rides with him on her way toward the town of Hatfield. You have heard nothing, sir —"

I turned swiftly round upon my heels, and looked very hard at him. He was holding a silver cup in his hand then, and his eyes were fixed upon it cunningly, but this did not hide the pleasure that he had in provoking me.

"You know that I have heard nothing," answered I.

"Not that my lady is to be married from her brother's house at Potter's Bar? — it 's the talk of all the town a week or more. Surely my master spoke of that, sir."

I drummed upon the window with my fingers, and then stood a while to breathe the sweetness of the morning air. Though the sun shone already with the heat of a mid-summer day, it seemed to me that a shadow lay upon the beauty of the garden.

"At what time does your mistress come?" I asked.

"I look for her within the hour," he replied; "it might even be that you would care to wait for her in the garden, sir. Yon village is too busy with its dead nowadays to think of men that have a price upon their heads —"

"Oh," said I, "this is news indeed. Strange that you should remember it for the first time now."

"Well," cried he, mighty impudently, "I was never a man to be first in things; and if you will lead now, I will even make haste to follow you."

With this he held the door open for me, and I went with a strangely light step down the broad oaken stairs, and so through the hall — which the sunlight lit up as with the smiles of forgotten friends — into the garden beyond. And Lord, what an exquisite delight to stand there where a fountain splashed, and the white water-lilies lifted their heads, and the pink blossom hid the trees, and the very air was the breath of the spirit of roses. Nay, it was a garden of delights, and though a great wall girded it about and seemed to tell me again that here was the place of my

captivity, there were long minutes when I stood to breathe the morning air, and, thanking God because I lived, forgot all else in this joy of flowers and sweet grasses and the music of the trees. And I was still so standing when I heard voices from the open door behind me, and, turning round, beheld my Lady Marjory and Sir Nathaniel at her side. She was prettily gowned in a riding dress of green velvet, and she had one hand holding the skirt of it while the other was busy with her whip; she beating her foot impatiently when she hesitated a moment at the open window of the dining-room. She was paler than when I had seen her last; and black rings beneath her eyes spoke of trouble of the mind, if not of the body — but the sun, striking upon her pretty hair, seemed to cap her little head with golden curls; and I thought that her very beauty was a thing which might compel the strongest man to some awe of her. Nor could I bring myself to believe that this was the little Marjory I had played with at Warboys — so much she seemed above my state, and so cold was the stately air she ever wore. Indeed, I remained stuck to the ground like a silly fellow who could make no compli-

ment — and even when she spoke to me, calling me "Hugh" to my great content — still there was that in her voice which forbade me to answer her with any familiarity or to forget who I was and what my condition had come to. Yet, Lord! thought I, did I but cry it out here in this garden that she was my wife — who should gainsay me? I knew that none could, and my great secret lay rustling close to my heart as a dove may flutter in the arms of a woman who holds it lovingly.

"Well, Hugh," she said, resting still by the window, "do you not give me good-morning?"

"My lady," said I, coming forward now with a quick step, "that would be the easier did your face speak of better health. Never saw I one so changed since we last met."

She laughed at this, and turned to Sir Nathaniel with a gesture of her hand — a gesture which, had she made it for me, would have been the prettiest that ever was.

"You hear, Sir Nathaniel, what tricks a month in the matted gallery has played with me. Master Hugh says that I am changed — ay, surely, I must be for him to speak of it."

"*Dame*," said he, "you are as much

changed as a flower that has been abroad a week with the tapers. You cannot stand friends to the night and look for the morning's favour, my lady. And, if I may say it, there was never one that loved the night as you."

Her eyes met mine and she flushed a little; showing some temper that he reminded her of her follies.

"Oh," she cried, "the child that was bred in the dark may well clap its hands when it see a little light —"

"If thereby its fingers be not burned," said I, with some heat.

"True, Master Peters," answered the captain, "you speak wise words — though they would be better from a pulpit than in this sunny garden. I trust that they have done well with you since I was here?"

"Sir," said I, "they have given me bread for my food and a bed for my body — if that be well, then it is for you to praise them. I have now been a prisoner five weeks in your house —"

"A prisoner!" exclaimed my lady, casting a quick glance at the other.

"Exactly," answered Sir Nathaniel, with a

sneer, "that is Master Hugh's opinion on it. My man watches night and day to save him from his follies, and he shows his gratitude by prating ever of his prison. Do you open your ears wide enough, he will rack your nerves with a finer tale of woe than old John Foxe put into his Acts and Monuments."

Marjory shook her head, her pale face more troubled than when she was come first into the garden.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh," cried she, "when will you have done with your obstinacy and your ingratitude?"

"My lady," said I, "they will last longer than the friendship which some seek to put upon me."

It would have grown to a quarrel there upon the spot, I swear, but for the sudden coming of Will Morgan, who told us that the breakfast was set in the dining-room; and all going in, we found a table bright with many flowers and much plate — come I know not whence. Nor was there any talk of bread and simple meats when Captain Goulding ate at Hampstead. The King himself might have been content with the great pasties and the French clarets and the rare old sack they now offered

us; while for serving-men we had six of the captain's attendants; all in fine liveries of brown and gold; and so grown in conceit that, Lord, they might have been the gentlemen and we the grooms. Nor could I hide it from myself that all this was done for little Marjory's sake; that she might know what sort of a man was to be husband to her. Scarce a minute passed but Sir Nathaniel amused her with some jest or quip which would never have come into my head had I thought upon it the year long. And there I must sit like a dumb booby, while they spoke of this jade and of that; of the things which the King had said — ay, silly enough for the most part — and Lord! of adventures which should have put any honest woman to the blush. But, I said ever, that had I sword in my hand I would make as pretty a show as my lady's man; and it was good to tell myself that at the leaping or the riding or the chase I was a better man than this pip of Paris, who should by right have been gowned in a fardingale, with his hair in a comb.

Through all this talk nothing had been said of the bond which the captain had required of me when last he was at the King's house. I

began to think that all recollection of it had escaped him; but when we were again in the shade of the garden after our breakfast, he, of a sudden, turned to me and said :—

"Well, Master Hugh, so we go to Paris together at the fall of the month?"

"Sir," said I, taken all aback, "I have given no word —"

"Exactly, and the better reason to give it now. I must be a week there before July is done, and will be, very willingly, your companion in the journey. You have convinced yourself by this time, I am sure, that your own country is no longer a home for you. But in Paris you will be a free man, with guineas in your pocket — and, who knows, a pretty French maid to nurse you to your old health. *Ventrebleu*, lad, if I had your years, I would know well what to do with them. And your choice is between this journey and the scaffold, let me tell you. Oh, I have no doubt of your answer."

He spoke as one who can command and persuade in the same voice, and I, stammering like a silly boy, seemed to give him my consent. Yet, God knows, my brain was all giddy with the things I would have said,

and could not — so strong did he compel me. As for my lady, when I raised my eyes to hers, I saw that her face was flushed scarlet, while her lips were close shut together, as the lips of one who has the impulse but not the wish to speak.

"Sir Nathaniel," cried I at last, "if it be my lady Marjory's wish that I go to Paris, then you shall find me a willing companion."

"You hear that," said he, turning his searching eyes full upon her; "you hear that, my lady — if it be your wish, he is my willing companion. What say you then?"

I could see her breast rise and fall with the effort she had to speak. Then, looking away from us both, she answered —

"It is my wish."

Before the next hour was struck upon the bell at Hampstead I heard them ride together from the house. But, God, I lay upon my bed with my tears choking me, and all the sunshine could not lift the darkness from my eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

I SEE ISRAEL WOLF AGAIN

For more than a week after my lady rode away from the King's house I lived like a man in a dream. Do what I would, my mind had no activity. A strange lethargy possessed my body, so that I lay whole days upon my bed, caring not that the sun shone or that summer was now with us. Nor did I heed Will Monk when he told me that I might go into the garden if I pleased. The house was my prison no longer — yet had I no liberty, no, nor will to wish it. Only a great longing, a longing for my little wife, which ate up my very heart, consumed me. I went near to a fever of the brain, and hours passed with all my limbs burning and only a sweet cold upon my lips, because I thought, in my dream, that she whom I loved bent to kiss me while I slept.

This fever had passed somewhat at the eighth day, and when the evening was come, I made bold to go out to the garden and sit awhile in the shade of a cypress tree which grew very fine there. No one moved in the house when I let myself out, nor was there any sound save that which came from the woods, where all the dying sent up their horrid cries, and the living prayed for the forgiveness of their sins. I found the air of the night very sweet to breathe, and stayed long listening to the splash of the brook which was at the garden's end. In truth, it fell full dark, and I believe I had sat there half the night but for a step upon the path near to me; and a knowledge, very sudden, that a stranger came toward the house. This waked me well enough; and I waited, with my heart in my mouth, to learn who came to the King's house at such an hour. Nor was it until the man walked almost to the fountain's edge that I knew him, and with a glad word of welcome put out both my hands to touch his.

"Israel Wolf," cried I; "oh, God be praised for this hour! It is, indeed, thou."

For a spell he stood quite silent, his eyes shining bright above the black cloak with which his face was veiled. But when he had looked at me long, he of a sudden set down the unlighted lantern upon the grass at his side and gripped my hands as I had wished him to do.

"Master Hugh," he said in a low voice, "there was never one so spoke to me since my mother died. God, that I, who am hated of men, should find a friend in thee."

"Oh," exclaimed I, "thou art, indeed, a friend, and so I will account thee always. Do not I owe my life to thee? It was well when thou wast with me; but now I am alone, and, God knows, there is none that cares. They have done ill to me in this house, Master Wolf, and I am sunk very low."

"Nay, Master," said he, drawing me out of the shade so that the moon fell full upon my face, "there is no need of words to tell me that. But I am come with better news for thee; and since thy jailor is like to be returned while we are yet warm in the talk, I will even make haste to do the bidding. Let us go up to the house, that

thou mayst read what is written. It is a letter from Master Ford which I carry."

"From Master Ford," cried I, going hot and cold with the joy of it.

"From no other," he replied, beginning to walk toward the house; "he heard but yesterday that thou wert here, and he has a strange tale upon his lips — you shall answer it presently, ay or no. He is much concerned about thee. His own people die like leaves in autumn, or he would have been at thy side to-day."

"Well," said I, "he might have knocked long upon this door without one answering him. Yet, since you are here, there must be another way. How came you in, Master Wolf?"

He laughed his deep, short laugh.

"It would be a strong house that would keep out Israel Wolf had he the mind to enter," he answered, and so saying we passed to the hall; and he lit his lantern, that I might read the parson's letter.

There are moments in all our lives which remain vivid memories to us, even when the years have passed. Such a moment was the one when, taking the paper in my hand,

I beheld again that strange writing which I had seen, and feared, so often in my childhood. But now I feared it no longer; every word was a precious message to me — the message of the living friend to one that is shut out from the world; a message of hope new come and of friendship restored. And my hope was very high when Master Wolf, holding the lantern, and the mists clearing presently from my eyes, I read the letter.

Its first lines spoke of the parson's love for me, and asked me of my condition at the King's house; he giving me great news of the plague in the city and of his own sorrows at the sufferings of his people. From that he passed to gossip of my lady, but quite suddenly he broke off his thread to write a thing which set my heart dancing and seemed like a word whispered by an angel in my ear.

"And this reminds me, Hugh," he wrote, after a great dash to cut the gossip short, "there was one visited me yesterday whom you knew well at Warboys — Tom Honeydew; him they called the 'tipsy parson.' He tells me a strange tale of my lady and of thee; a tale of the years when she was thy father's

guest. I will not plague thee with the whole, but the end of it is this, that one day, when he passed through the park and found thee playing lover to the child, he married thee to her for the jest's sake. He was ever a prating fellow; and this, I doubt not, is one of his tipsy humours. I conjure thee, tell the bearer if it be so or no — for were it as he has told us, then, surely, she is thy wife, though the King himself deny thee. But, Hugh, it cannot be, for, as God lives, if thou wert her husband — yet let me hold my pen from such 'follies.' The jest is that I should mention so silly a thing in my letter to thee."

I put down the writing, but my head was so light with joy that I fell to laughing very drolly; nor, upon my life, could I say a word to Master Wolf, but must titter away like a girl grown hysterical. He, however, was quick to bring me to reason.

"Well," said he, watching me closely, "do I carry 'ay' or 'no' to Parson Ford?"

"Oh, Master Israel," cried I, breaking down upon it altogether, "you shall carry 'ay' — a hundred times, 'ay,' 'ay.' She is my wife, God knows; she is my wife, though all the world deny me."

I sank down upon the oaken seat now, and, rending the letter as if it had been a treasure of gold, I buried my face in my hands, and the tears of weakness and of gladness trickled upon my fingers. Long had my secret lain like a heavy burden upon my mind. But now the burden was lifted suddenly from me, and the joy was a joy hardly to be borne. Nor was there ever one so gentle to another in trouble as Israel Wolf to me in that hour.

"Master Hugh," said he, laying his hand upon my arm to comfort me, "if it be indeed as thou sayest, then is this a great day for thee. God witness that midnight shall not be struck twice and find us in the King's house. My time is spent now, and to delay here longer would be to imperil thee, but to-morrow at this hour you shall hear me in the garden; and if I am the bearer of ill news then, why say that another and not old Israel comes to thee! Meanwhile, should Will Monk trouble thee, here is that which may hold him to obedience. He means ill to thee, and there is that abroad which may make this the night of thy greatest danger. I say no more — watch him well, and do not forget that a man heavy in sleep is death's neighbour. Count

me friend always, for the words which thou hast spoken to him with the devil's face."

He drew his cloak the closer about his bright eyes, and snatching up the lantern, he passed into the dark of the garden. Long I listened to the fall of his foot upon the gravel walk; and only when a great stillness fell upon the house did a moonbeam show me what it was he had left behind him upon the table.

But when the ray fell there, I saw a dagger, such as the French use, and all the hilt of it was sparkling with shining gems.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN OUT GUARD OF THE NIGHT

THE church bell at Hampstead made it ten of the clock before I moved from my seat in the hall of the King's house. It seemed odd beyond compare to me that one hour should bring such great tidings; should, as it were, strip the cloak of my foreboding from me and leave me my own self, — the Hugh Peters that was ever up in the charge at Worcester, and reckoned the best man among them when Charles Stuart was to be taken. Yet this was the wonder which old Israel worked. His very word of greeting seemed like a trumpet-blast in my eyes. I asked myself what sort of a ninnyhammer I had become that I should vex and fret for the want of a little meat, or bend my pride readily to the burden of Master Monk's impertinence. Three years had peril been my portion, awake or asleep, — peril of the sea, peril of the King's men and them that hunted me — yet

never once had tears come to my eyes nor my heart grown heavy as it did often in this French rogue's house. But that woman's day was gone now. Dagger in my hand, I swore that I was as proper a man as any in Hampstead. And had not old Israel brought me the letter which spoke of better days for me? — aye, and of something which brought blood to my head when I did but think of it a moment, as a lover may turn shyly to look at a mistress before his head is bowed again.

I say that I was changed as never man was, and this is a word I will hasten to make good. For the silence and the darkness of the King's house I cared nothing now. "Let Master Monk come as soon as it may please him," said I, "and we will see what sort of a match we make." Never was there an apothecary's draught which ministered to a sick man like those words which Israel Wolf had spoken to me. I began to hunger for the air of freedom; but it was the hunger of hope about to be fulfilled. "To-morrow," cried I, "to-morrow we shall ride, I know not whither, I know not how, but spurs will jingle upon my heels again; the King's high-road will be open to me; it may even be that we shall

turn our faces to the north as my lady has done." The expectation made me like a man giddy with wine. I heard the church bells strike, and their echo had not died away before I thrust the dagger under my vest and began to pace the hall again. "To-morrow," I said, ever repeating the word as a delicious thing to be kept long upon the tongue, — "to-morrow, I shall see the man with the devil's face again." And so mighty pleased was I that I must have spoken my thoughts aloud, for some one of a sudden answered me from the darkness of the hall; and when I turned quickly, there was Master Monk, come like a shadow to watch me in my pleasure.

"Well, Hugh Peters," cried he, very tipsily, for he had been drinking at the Spanish inn, "and what of to-morrow?"

"Oh," said I, with poor cunning, "to-morrow, perchance, we will sum our scores, Master Monk, and see what charge I have against you. 'T would be odd if I could demand no reckoning for that which you have done to me in this house — you and the man out of France who pays your dirty wage."

He was all taken aback at this, you may be sure; and for a long while he said nothing, only fumbling with his hands to strike a spark for his lantern, which he did very ill and clumsily. When at last he had the light, I beheld his face, and for the first time that I knew of he had forgot his jade's titter.

"Look you," said he, being hard put to it when he would have walked across the hall, "look you, Master Psalm-Singer, what if I were no longer the servant of him you name? How say you then? Do you reckon the lighter with me? God's truth, I am an honest man. Who gainsays that must answer Will Monk. To the devil with your Nathaniel Goulding! is my word; and here's my hand upon it."

I was mightily astonished to hear him speak so; and, as I live, the saying was not to be understood by me. Nor was he in any state to let me know his meaning, for the ale had knotted his tongue; and he stood there, very foolishly, holding out his hand and crying to me that I should take it. When he saw that I would not, he bestirred himself to make fast the doors and windows of the hall; and bringing himself to something of

his old manner presently, he ordered me to my bed with a tipsy anger which was a silly thing to see.

"Come, Master Peters," cried he, "'t is ten of the clock — ten of the clock, and you abroad. What shall I say to the captain my master? Shall I say nothing? A plague on the pair of you! Would you have me held in blame? Out on you for a pestilent fellow! I will be blamed for no such blockhead. I am an honest man, little Psalm-Singer — dost hear?"

What more he would have done in his tipsy blindness I know not, for he fell, all on the instant, while he was seeking to come at me; and the lantern being broke, we two were in the black darkness, — he staggering after me, and I running round and round the hall as merry as a lad at the play. God knows I feared Master Monk no longer then. All my old spirit seemed to be breathed back into my heart. Nay, I laughed aloud at him, crying, "Catch that catch can!" and only when he lay like one dead upon the floor did I leave him and go up to my bedroom; yet not to sleep, so busy was my head with the morrow which awaited me. I could not forget

at such a time that old Israel had spoken of this being the night of my greatest danger. The man of France would not come until three weeks were gone; Will Monk, him that I hated as never I hated a man yet, lay wanting life in his legs upon the boards below. Who then could harm me in that hour of waiting?

I put this question to myself standing at the open window of my shabby room and looking over towards Barnet, whither my lady had ridden to be married, as they said, in the house of her brother at Potter's Bar. The great highway toward York, given over to robbers and footpads at such an hour, if the times be ordinary, was upon this night very busy with waggons passing, and them that feared the plague rolling in their coaches away past the common of Finchley. I could see many tents of the poorer people, fled from the city; and once I beheld a naked man run out from such a habitation and fall dead upon the grass, raising so dreadful a cry when he tumbled that some wild beast might have been abroad killing in the woods. This frighted me a good deal, and I drew back for a spell; but when I returned to the window,

a woman and three children were kneeling about the body of the man, seeking to drag it towards the pool in the hollow. And watching them at their work, though careful to keep a field between him and the dead man, was one of the King's Guard, riding upon a great black horse.

Odd to tell, I watched this man for some while without any thought coming to me that he should be abroad upon my business. It was pretty to see the clear light making silver of all the bright buckles and of the arms he carried; playing now upon the muzzle of a pistol stuck out of the holster, now upon the steel of his harness or the sheath of his sword as it hung loose against his saddle-cloth. And when anon he put the horse to a trot and passed beneath my very window, I watched him as a boy may watch troopers come to the bivouac in his village. I had been so long out of the world that the littlest thing pleased my eyes and held me in amusement. And so I stood, begrudging the guard even the horse which, as I said, was to carry him to London. He, however, had not ridden a musket-shot from our place when he turned and came back the same way; only this time he looked hard

at the King's house, and even drew rein, as though he would knock upon the gate. This it was, I think, which awakened me to the danger; and knowing well now what his business must be, I drew back from the window, telling myself that they had sold me to the King's men, and that here was the peril of which Master Wolf spoke.

It wanted at this time a quarter to the hour of eleven, and the quiet of night seemed to have come at length even upon the sick in the neighbouring meadows and woods. I knew that this trooper could have no work to do in the village of Hampstead at such an hour; and when my first bewilderment had gone by, which it was not overquick to do, I began to tell myself that I had the dagger which Israel Wolf had left to me; and that Will Monk being no man for such a time, there was but one against me, and he with the gate yet to break down before he could come at me. This gave me courage, and I ran round to the back of the house, wherefrom you can see Paul's on a bright day; and, looking over the garden, I searched all the vale with my eyes, but no one was abroad there, not even a sick man come out to die. I knew then that, could

I best this fellow who patrolled the road, I might yet cheat the snare they had laid for me. God is my witness, I had been in many a place of greater peril than the King's house seemed to be on that night; and never was my spirit higher than when I stood at my window for the third time and watched the trooper, whom I judged to be the messenger of my misfortune.

I had thought, when I ran round to the eastern turret of the house, that the man was about to knock boldly upon our door, and so to come in for me without any idle parley; but it was not so. Though it fell a little dark while I waited, there was yet so much light that I could see him halted in the shadow of a great beech tree, which borders upon the road at a spot, it may be, a hundred paces from our door. He had got off his horse now, and was buckling the girth of his saddle; but when the moon shone again, I saw him take a pistol from his holster and prime it; and no sooner was this work done than a low whistling was to be heard from the further side of the thicket, and presently three more, like to him, rode up over the grass and leaped their horses but on to the road. There were now four in

all that I could count, though, Lord knows, I doubt not that many more lay behind them in the woods. For the matter of that, I would stay at my window no longer; but, holding my dagger bare in my hand, I ran down the stairs very swiftly, telling myself that if I could find no way out of the garden, then was this the last night which Hugh Peters might hope to live.

There was moonlight in the hall when I entered it, but for a little while I saw nothing of Will Monk. I had forgot, very foolishly, that all the doors were fast locked, and the lower windows shuttered, before I went to my bed; and now, when I turned the handle of the great door, this was remembered to my confusion. As well might I have sought to pass the wall of the King's tower as have shaken this stout barrier which stood between me and my liberty. Abashed and angry, hope refusing to befriend me, I drew back from the door. Little it availed that I had been of good spirit in my bed-chamber if I must wait here in the darkness of the hall until the troopers were come in to take me. I could have bit my hand at the thought; but I was not the man of yesterday, and my will being

hardened at this rebuff, I said, "Let it be between Will Monk and me, and God help the weaker man."

Until this moment I had seen nothing of Monk; nor did I remember where he lay, drunkenly, upon the floor. The ill-shaped patches of moonlight, getting the forms of strange figures when they came flooding over the top of the shutters and through the fine picture window, showed me no form of a man sleeping. Three times I paced the hall with the steps of one feeling for an obstacle, yet never did my foot touch one; nor my ear tell me that a man breathed in the place. And all the time there was this in my head, that the troopers must be even now at the gate; if, indeed, Monk himself had not drawn bolt to them. God knows how my heart beat when I stood to listen for any sound in the courtyard; even for the bark of a dog or the groan of a hinge upon the turn. But of these warnings there was none, not so much as the whinny of one horse to another. The very fall of my own foot echoed like an omen in the chamber; the unbodied armour around me seemed filled with spirits of the dead come back to mock me. I sank down upon a bench at last, crying

to God to help me, since no longer could I hope to find any help for myself.

This stupor, for such it was, lasted, it might be, for the space of ten minutes. I was awakened from it by as strange a thing as ever man lived to see; for what should happen, while I sat there upon the bench, but that the little door of the hall opened slowly, and in came Will Monk, a lighted lantern in his left hand, a great rope of keys in his right. I knew well that he had been drunk with wine when I had gone to my bedchamber; and it was plain to me that sleep had done nothing to give him his legs again, for he reeled into the hall like a tipsy sailor, and his face was a horrid thing to see. Well for him if ale had brought him to this condition: but the hand of God was heavy upon him in that hour. No sooner did he open his lips than I drew back, crying out that he should not come near me; while he, very pitifully, stretched out his arms to touch me, and implored me, in the most woeful voice, that I would save him from the grave.

"My God, my God!" he cried. "I have the spots upon me. Oh, Master Peters, you will not let me die. Dost hear? I am struck

with the sickness. Lord Jesus, I can feel the earth upon my face; it blinds my eyes. Wilt not help me, Master Hugh? Oh, never will the sun shine for me again. I have the death at my heart already."

He raised his voice until his woeful crying was like that of a multitude of men raving in the house. And he pursued me with horrid groans, while the sweat fell in great drops from my head, and my body was wet as the body of one who had stood long in the rain.

Strong as my fear of the troopers riding in the road might be, I feared this hastening death the more. To be prisoned with it there in the hall was a thing to make the brain turn. Nay, I screamed out aloud in my terror of him, and showing him my dagger, I swore that he should feel the blade of it in his heart if he did not stand away from me. At which he drew back, and beginning to sob like a woman weak in pain, he knelt at last upon the floor and cried to God for forgiveness of his sins, or fell to most horrid blasphemies against the death which was now sure upon him. And so the end came, swift and sudden, and in mercy; and with a long-drawn shriek of fear lest they

would throw his body into the pit, he ceased to breathe.

But I turned my face away from him, and stretching myself upon the floor that I might touch his rope of keys with the tip of my fingers, drew his burden from him. Then I let myself out into the garden, and ran long, fearing in my folly that the dead man still followed me.

CHAPTER XIX

I FOLLOW ISRAEL WOLF

I CAME into the garden, I say; fear of the plague driving me rather than the fear of the King's men. But the strength and cool of the air soon brought me to sense; and if they were not enough, a loud rapping of muskets-butts upon the great gate of the house told me very plainly how I stood. I could hear the troopers now, calling loudly to Will Monk to open to them; while one, strong in voice above the others, bawled that they came in the King's name, and would even find a door for themselves if they were not answered quickly. Well, I knew that I had but a minute, before I should see them after me in the garden; yet, though one had held a pistol at my head, I could find no way; no, nor gate nor wall that was to be climbed. Had the King's house been a prison, they could not have set a stouter fence about it.

Everywhere the forbidding barrier of stone raised its spiked head into the loom of the night above me. I ran this way, and that; now seeking a tree to help me, now thinking that some arbour or cellar might give me hiding, yet got no further — only to this, that I stamped upon the ground in my anger, and swore that I would stab the first who touched me, though my life paid forfeit for the folly. And so resolving, I began to run again; but I had not taken twenty paces when I heard a step behind me, and at the first sound of it I fled with new strength — now across the lawns, now through the bushes, now back toward the house. Nor was this flight broken until, wanting breath and staggering in my steps, I reeled against a wall, and waited, dagger in hand, until the man should come up to me.

He came over slowly, one hand held up in warning, the other upon his lantern.

I thought it a strange thing that he did not call out to me; but he said nothing, only beckoning me to follow him. And so I let him advance until the moon's beams struck upon his face, when I saw that no King's man was after me, but only old Israel, and

he wanting breath to speak. Never did the Lord send pursuer so welcome.

"Oh, Israel Wolf," cried I, running out to him gladly, "cursed be the night when I have turned from thee! Dost hear the troopers beating upon the door? Thou wilt help me, Israel?"

His answer was a single word, spoke low.

"Follow," he said; and with this command he led me swiftly through the garden, until he stood at the very foot of the green where the grounds run out into the lap of the hollow. There was here an old flight of stone steps, much chipped; but they appeared to lead nowhere, except it were to the wall, in which no door was to be seen. I had never looked for a harbourage in such a spot, though I had lived for a hundred years; but Master Wolf went without halt to the steps, and ran down them. I observed now that a pick, such as masons use, stood ready at the foot of the flight; and this in hand, my guide began to lay some heavy blows upon the face of the stone; and at the third stroke he found an iron ring, which was nothing less than the ring of a trap let in flush with the buttress, like a shutter in the frame of a window. To

open the trap was work beyond ordinary; but we pulled hard upon it together; and presently it fell with some noise and a great flying of dust and rubbish. Then I saw beyond it the mouth of a black hole which, had I not soon proved it otherwise, I might have named the mouth of a well.

All this was quick work, you may be sure; but to me, who heard the clamour which the King's men were now making at the outer gate, it seemed like the thing of a day rather than of a minute. Often I besought Master Wolf that he would hasten; but he gave me no answer other than that of his acts, which were as well ordered as the acts of a man sipping his ale in a tavern. Once he had the trap down, he knew well what he was doing; and the dust scarce settled before his lantern swung in the hole which he had laid bare, and he himself made ready to follow the light.

"Now, Master Hugh," he cried, while he let himself into the well and began to go down with steps which showed me that he trod the rungs of a ladder, "a long good-night to yon brawlers. Make sure that your courage comes down here with you, for Heavens knows if there be a stranger place

in all Middlesex. You will find the iron rings at your heel if you do but follow me. 'T is better at the worst than the company of the devils who wait yonder. And once passed, the day shall find us beyond Barnet. God's word, they must have broke the gate! Dost hear them bawling for Will Monk? 'T is odd if they can wake him to-night!"

His laugh was a thing rusted with long disuse, and very harsh to hear. I had a shudder upon me when he spake of them waking Will Monk; but it passed at once, for I was well assured that the King's men were now in the courtyard, and that life was to be had or lost upon the moment. Nay, I watched him descend with greedy eyes, and discovered immediately that the hole went deep into the ground, having slimy walls and stones upon which creeping things moved, and a tangle of roots thrusting themselves from the nooks and crannies. All this the lantern showed me, and when it had dropped so far down that it was but a twinkling star in the depths, I heard Israel call to me to shut the trap and follow him. Nor were ten seconds ticked before I stood beside him, to find myself at the mouth of a narrow archway

which seemed to lead into the very bowels of the earth.

It was a place to awe a bolder man than Hugh Peters, being dark beyond any cellar that I have known, and chill with the damp of the clammy earth, and very full of lizards and great worms and horned beetles, which were scared by the light and running blindly. Here and there water dripped upon the slimy floor, which was soft and oozy like to the floor of a water-pit; while the air came very weighty and went hot to the lungs, so that we were hard put to it to get our breath. Had any other than Israel Wolf guided me, I would the sooner have faced the troopers than embarked upon such an emprise; but wherever the man walked there courage followed. I stood by him with the trust that a child may place in his father, saying that he surely knew. Yet was I not one whit the wiser as to the plan he had; nor did I see what safety we had gotten from hiding in such a well, when the first walk round the garden must bring the troopers to the trap, — of which I made mention, but he silenced me at once, hurrying me on into the tunnel, and saying that all was now well.

"Yon rogues may bark now an it please them, Master Hugh," cried he, holding the lantern high above his head that I might guard my steps. "The night is ours, and when the day shall come, we will have horses under us. There are but three men in Hampstead that know of this place; yet I will wager there is none other beside Israel Wolf who would venture it. Dost hear water falling? It is the burn which runs from Highgate, and we are even about to cross it."

"Well," said I, pressing close upon his heels, though I had a great dread of the living things and of the darkness, "why should they not follow us here, Israel? Where two have come, ten may search. Surely they will find the trap."

"Sir," said he, "this is no night for words. Give me but a half hour, and I will listen like a scholar. You ask me why they may not follow — yonder is my answer."

He bent down very low now, and showed me the mouth of a well, exceeding large and dark and green with slime. A single plank spanned the orifice; and when he let his lantern a little way down into the hole, I saw water flowing swiftly; the spray of it being

like a foam of jewels, the song of it like voices afar and murmuring.

"The burn is here, Master," cried Israel, the while he knelt that he might prove the condition of the bridge. "It runs below our feet, and our path lies across it. If you love your life do not breast the plank until I am over. It may even be that it will break; in which event, you are like to call long for Israel Wolf and to find him dumb. Nay, none will make less merry if I be gone. And hark ye, they are behind us at the trap."

It was as he said. We could hear in the tunnel behind us the sound of heavy blows falling upon the wood; and great as was my fear for the life of him I had learned to love, I had no word when he began to cross the plank upon his hands and knees. But every quiver and bend of it set my nerves twitching, and I scarce dared to breathe until I saw that it held him. It was a mighty relief to me when he stood up, clear to be seen, on the opposite side, and bade me cross as he had done. At any other time I would the sooner have cut off my hand than have trod a bridge so frail; but I knew that the troopers were already in the tunnel, and I thought of them

rather than of the foul place below me when I clung to the plank and began to breast it. And I was the heavier man, I make sure; for the wood wormed and twisted beneath me at every step, and there was no moment when I did not see the flowing water and the walls of green slime, and even rats of monstrous size running in and out between the crevices of the bricks. Indeed, I said to myself often that I must surely fall, and I remember that my mind would picture for me the terror of lying down there with the filthy water flowing upon my face, and the rats touching my flesh, and all the weed and dirt upon my hands; for the lantern showed these things very clearly, and Israel's cry that I should hasten was ever dinning in my ears.

"For God's sake be a little quicker, Master Hugh!" exclaimed he at last; and then: "Surely they tread the tunnel now;" or again: "Hold up thy hands, the plank gives." These things he said; while I felt the wet wood doubling at my weight, and became aware all on the instant that it was breaking with me. God! — it was to die a cruel death that I should fall into the darkness of the well.

The plank went, I say, with a great crash. So sudden was it, that I threw up my arms, crying pitifully to Israel that he should not let me fall. Then I seemed to be held in mid-air; and I swung to and fro in the abyss, seeing nothing but the face of Israel with the dim light shining upon it, and knowing not that he had caught my hand and so held me. Presently, a grip like the grip of an iron ring upon my arm spake his message; and inch by inch, with a fearful wrenching in the socket of my shoulder and an overwhelming terror of the pit blinding me, I was drawn to the bank. Nor was I up upon the ground before two troopers appeared at the head of the tunnel, and called to us that we should stand.

"In the King's name," cried the first that came up. But him old Israel answered with a bullet; and when he fired his pistol, it seemed to me that thunders shook the pit and that all the air was full of smoke.

"In the King's name," repeated Master Wolf, mocking him very merrily. "Ay, surely, that is a name we know; and we will even answer your call when you shall bring us a bridge for the pit, my friend. Dost need to wash thyself — there is water below if you

do but stoop to find it. I give you good-night, master."

His full laugh rang round and sonorous in the pit; but the man gave shot for shot, and brought a sod from the ceiling above us; which quickened our steps better than any fiddler's music. I was by no means recovered from my great fright; though fear is a fine surgeon, and fear it was which kept me at Master Wolf's heels, while he ran on through the tunnel, and soon was beyond either shot or hearing. For a hundred paces, it may be, we continued to go down, the path being rough and steep beneath us; but when we had accomplished so much, we came upon a little pool of water, and this deepened so quickly that it ran above our ankles almost before my eyes had seen it.

"Think nothing of it, lad," said Israel, turning to me to be sure that I had kept close. "'T is but a swill at the worst, and will not touch thy knees — at least, it should be so, if it stands as it did in the Lord-General's day. We will give thee dry clothes directly, when we find Master Ford at the birling of the wine. Ay, for a truth, the night is near done."

With this he took my hand to lead me; but soon we learnt that the passage was changed since he had last trod it, for the water came above our knees at the third step, and we had not made twenty paces when it flowed about our waists.

"God send that I have brought thee to no trap!" cried Israel, holding the lantern to observe what lay before us. "Never did I hear of a flood in the hollow of the vale. Canst swim, Master Peters?"

I told him that I had never done such a thing in all my life, which was poor help to his intention; but presently he had heart for it, and began to go on again.

"Shouldst lose thy legs, put hand upon my shoulder, if thou dost not fear to touch me as most do," he cried; and, so saying, he walked boldly forward, and the water ran up to our breasts and went near to carrying us off our feet. What was worse, there was no shallowing of it then, for every step we took landed us the deeper in it; so that it came at length even to flow cold about my chin, and I called out to him that I was done with.

Fear of water brings panic quick to them

that have no skill in it. I might live long, yet never forget that moment when I stood with head bent back and little waves flowing upon my mouth; while old Israel besought me not to clutch him, and for answer I did but hold to him the more. I could see the roof of the tunnel very plainly then — the loathsome spiders upon it, the weed hanging green, the beetles running. I knew that we were down, as it were, in the very depths of the earth, and I told myself that far above us there was moonlight shining upon the meadows, and the sweet night air, and the great sky in which the stars roll. Nor did I wonder any more that men feared the grave exceedingly; so dread was the thought of being shut down there whence no cry could pass out, no, nor sob be heard, nor voice of man be answered. It seemed to me that God had willed it that I should die in the pit, with the water for my shroud and the rats to keep vigil, and the eternal silence in my ears. No longer had I any mastery of my reason, but clung to Master Wolf; and he, beseeching me, even striking me, was all the while struggling for his foothold, so that we went under at last together, and our lantern

was soused, and the very dark of death enveloped us.

We went down, I say, like stones into the pit; and we struggled together, it might have been for minutes, while the water ran cold in my windpipe and began to gurgle in my throat. I had never known a worse hurt; and whenever they talk now of the pleasures of them who get their death by drowning, that night comes back to me in clear remembrance. For never did I lose the right use of my senses the whole time — and God knows how long that was — we struggled in the hole. Once, indeed, I had foot upon the earth, and so got an instant of delay, during which my arm-pits rose above the surface of the pool; and I beheld Israel, still thrusting me from him. Yet was it but an instant before the water was in my ears again, roaring there like the fall of some mighty cataract. And this time I thought it to be the end; for it was as though I had knives in my right side, and every breathing was a new hurt.

I thought it to be the end, God witness, and such it was, though not such an end as I had looked for. That very weakness which

now came upon me was my saviour, since it compelled me to let go of Israel, and thereby to give him his freedom. How he did it I know not. He has said ever that I, in my violent fears, pushed him headlong upon the shallows; but of this I remember nothing, only that I thought myself to be gone, and was astonished presently to find that I lived still, though the pain in my side was hardly to be borne, and the noise in my ears was like that of a bee buzzing. Whichever way it was, we came to our feet again most miraculously, as I shall tell to my dying day; and when we had both rested face downward to the earth, that the water might run out of us, I heard old Israel speak.

"Canst see to touch me, lad?" he asked.

I searched for my voice and found it. The sound of it was like that of a worn fife, high and tremulous in the darkness.

"Ay, Israel," cried I. "God be praised, I feel thy hand."

"Then let me help thee to thy feet," said he, "yonder is the light of the inn."

I raised my head, and saw far away, like the glow of a lantern in the passage, an aureole of light shining from above straight down

into the tunnel. It was the light from the kitchen of the tavern at Finchley; and ten minutes after we had seen it, Parson Ford was filling me a cup of steaming ale, the while Gideon carried my clothes to be dried at the fire.

CHAPTER XX

NORTHWARD UPON THE GREAT ROAD

THEY had been waiting for us at the stair's head; and now when we came up, all dripping like dogs, and green with the slime of the water, they held their tongues, and were the busier thereby to give us those comforts of which we had such pressing need. There is a picture in my mind to this day of the parson stirring a great wassail bowl of ale by the kitchen fire, while the tavern man's dame ran hither and thither, beseeching us that we should not bring the soldiers down upon her house; for, she said, she was a poor woman, and had lost her son already of the sickness. But a guinea placed beneath the candle's light brought her quickly to another mind; and when old Israel and I were blanketed at her hearth, and our clothes hung in the ingle, she forgot that any soldiers were so much as abroad that night. Not so the parson,

whose first word was one which bade us hasten.

"Hugh, my lad," said he, doing this and that and everybody's business beside, "I shall be a very old man when I forget this night — ay, and so much upon my tongue that a second glass would not see me through it; but Israel has told thee?"

I gave him ay, between my sips at the ale; and Israel made the word good.

"Master Ford," said he, "an you give us a discourse, we are surely lost. 'T is but a mile from here to the King's house. Does any man point the road to them, we may look for the troopers before the hour is struck."

"Ay," chimed in old Gideon, "trust my master to salt the pork when it would be the better plain; but ye must know that we have the watchers out. That gives ye the start of them by ten minutes, and the horses ready, Master Israel."

"'T is good," said Israel, turning his coat with his own hands; "give me but a meadow for my grace, and I will find a horse to gallop any King's beast in the county. Do you bear news, Master Ford?"

The Parson drew a chair to the fire very methodically. When he had filled himself a glass of ale he began to tell us.

"I have news," said he, in the manner of one reckoning how much he should disclose. "I have news, Israel; and first it is of my lady. She has gone to Potter's Bar, as we heard. Unless the Lord shall see fit to make us his ministers, she will be a wife before two Sabbaths are fled."

"She being as none can deny, the wife of him that I have loved from my youth up," cried old Gideon, with very poor manners as I thought. But Parson Ford was not put out at this.

"Hugh," he said, turning to me — and it was wonderful how civil they all spoke to me after they heard of the strange thing at Warboys — "Hugh, I know well now that thy tale is no lad's boast. But of this they have told thee, since my letter spoke of Tom Honeydew's confession. Would to God that we had other proof to stand between my lady and the sin she is coming to presently!"

"Master Ford," exclaimed I very eagerly, "what proof is needed beyond the witness

of him that married us? Will he not speak before other men even as he spoke before you?"

"Nay," said the parson, setting down the glass quickly; "Tom Honeydew will never speak again, my lad. He died of the sickness yesterday."

It was a cruel word for me to hear, coming like a thunderbolt upon my new-gotten hopes. I could say nothing to them for a long while; and we were all very silent in the room. When the Parson spoke again, he laid his hand upon my own, as though he would have softened the hurt.

"Hugh," said he, "I cannot think that the Lord has put the cup to thy lips to snatch it from thee by the death of this man. And so I bid thee ride to Potter's Bar, if it be that thou canst come there without harm. I have writ a letter for thee to my lady. Should she marry when that is read, then indeed is she a wanton and no worthy wife to any man. More we cannot do. For who would listen to our story? and how mayest thou tell that story with a price upon thy head and all the world protesting that thou art a spy come out of France on the French

King's business? Nay, we have nothing but our exhortation, and what is the worth of that to a woman who has the mind for a man?"

This was very true, though you must know that Parson Ford was the last man in all the town to speak of a woman's whim; he, I swear, never having so much as pressed the hand of one. Nevertheless he reasoned with some sense, and this intention that I should ride to Potter's Bar was very pleasing to me. "I shall at least be near her," said I to myself; "it may be, shall talk with her." And this was no little thing to one who had thought to be carried soon out of his own country, and set where he might never dare to remember the old time and all the sweetness of it. In which spirit I thanked the Parson, and said that I was too ready to ride whensoever he wished. Thereafter, and with much talk, an hour passed, and our clothes were fit for our backs again, though still very wet and like to give us pains.

It was at this time that the Parson promised me that he himself would come to Potter's Bar when the Sabbath was over, the night being that of Saturday, and the needs

of his poor people whom the sickness was killing beyond number, detaining him so long in London.

"When I come, Hugh," said he, "there shall be no gloved word found; no, nor want of plain speaking — it may be at the very Lord's table where they marry her. She should be at Potter's Bar ere this. You may trust old Israel to carry a letter to her, though God grant that she does not look upon his face. She had a maid of the name of Kitty with her when she set out from Whitehall. It would be a service to hold me in the remembrance of the wench. Dost mind, lad? — no great affection of the message, but just the word that Parson Ford has not forgot little Kitty, and some day would speak with her again. That would be at eve to-morrow, when thy own business is done. Thou wilt not fail to let me know of this, lest, perchance, my coming be delayed and Monday find me still within the bar at Aldgate?"

I told him that I would do his bidding very faithfully; and when he had given me the letter and we were agreed to lie in the woods by Barnet until opportunity was found

of putting the writing into the hand of her whose name it bore, a man came running in from the hill-top to say that the troopers were now gone galloping toward Hornsey; though whether they would turn presently and come by our road he could not tell. At which we bustled out of the house very quickly, and so stood in the great road which runs all the way from London to the city of York, and further than that, as the tale goes. There I took farewell of the Parson, thanking him for all he had done; but he would hear none of it, saying again, — for he forgot that he had said it already, —

"My lady had a maid by the name of Kitty with her when she set out. If it can be done conveniently, and thou wouldst recall me to her mind, — just a word of remembrance, Hugh, — I would be grateful to thee."

I told him that I would, being careful to put him to no shame; and when it was said, I answered old Israel, and sprang upon the horse they had found for me. Many a farewell I waved to them, and long after their voices had died away I saw the twinkling lights of the tavern and the figure of my

master very plain to be seen in the middle of the road.

And, God knows, my heart was light because so many had learned to love Hugh Peters.

CHAPTER XXI

WE PASS THE MAN IN THE WAGGON

It was very dark when we struck the Great North Road. A mount of storm-cloud hung heavy above the hill at Hampstead, and I could see the lamps of the village behind us like stars upon the hillside; but the air was full of the omen of storm, and anon the heavens began to tremble and to be flecked with rushing fires. Fast as we went — and never was man better served than I with the shapely horse they had found me — the tempest drew upon us, covering up all the open fields of the heaven; so that it left at last but a great arc in the east, and soon that was hidden by the accumulation of the vapours. Anon big drops of rain began to pit upon the docks at the hedge's foot. I felt them upon my hand and saw them glistening about my holsters; but upon my face they did not come, so well did the great hat I wore give protection to my eyes.

Storm ever carries foreboding in its path; and though we had no good ground of complaint because darkness thus came down to shield us, old Israel and I were tongue-tied for the first half hour after we had ridden away from the inn. And I was well content that he should point the road; I following at his heels, and always within pistol-shot of him. There were few abroad at such an hour, though we passed, it may have been, twenty waggons before we came to the inn where the junction of the roads is; and once we happed upon a coach with a nobleman asleep inside it, and his man stretched out upon the grass in the ditch. But at the junction we saw lights and heard the clamour of voices; so much so, that Israel checked his horse and began to look about for me.

"Were it any other time," said he, when I rode up, "we would put the meadow between yon brawlers and ourselves. But I make bold to like their company better than that of the soldiers, Master Hugh. If it please you, we will steal upon them at the walk, and then go by when they least look for us. You have pistol in your holster, and I doubt not you will know how to use it if

any molest you. Maybe 't is some matter of the sickness which brings them from their beds; and do we but go cautiously, we shall pass observation."

He held in his horse with a firm hand now, and we rode up to the tavern so stealthily that none of the shouting rogues heard us at the first. For the matter of that, they were too deep in contemplation of a spectacle which only such a time could show them. I observed that a waggon was drawn before the door of the tavern, while a man within the waggon begged some favour of the men who stood round about him, — a favour which they denied, for they threatened him with their cudgels and hayforks; and beyond that, they had lit a great fire in the street of the village, the better to keep the plague from them. Nor could I imagine, upon the instant, why they charged this man with a wish to carry the death to them; but presently I saw the body of him that had driven the waggon lying huddled by the forewheel, and the ropes, which were his reins, yet lay between his fingers. It was plain then that he had fallen from his seat at the very moment of his passing the junction, and having died with

no grace, — as so many did in that year of the visitation, — all the villagers came running out to tell one another that they would have the spots upon them next day, and that here was the harbinger of their misfortunes. With which thought, I imagine, they lit the fires and prevented the master of the man coming down from his waggon.

This was how the thing stood at the moment when we rode up. The man begged pitifully for help, both for his servant and for himself; the people of the place answered him with a threat of instant death if he did not at once quit their village, and take the body of the other with him. So strong were they in the argument that our horses were at their very backs before they knew it; and I had told myself already that we should pass them by without hurt, when a burly fellow, bigger than the others, unfortunately caught sight of us, and began to cry out that we had ridden in from London and must surely be folks tainted with the pestilence. At which he ran after us, and stretching out his arms very wide, like the sails of a mill, he bade Master Wolf stand.

"Sir," said he, "I am the Constable of

Finchley, and I forbid you passage by this road."

"Sir," answered Master Wolf very civilly, "we thank you for your words, and will even commit them to our memories. How say you, the Constable of Finchley? God's truth, you enjoy no sweating employment, my master. I may even make bold to tell you that you grow fat in it."

The man was very angry, and protested upon it.

"Sir," ventured he, "do you ride over the King's Constable?"

"Ay, surely," exclaimed Master Wolf, "over two of them if there be the need. Do you but lie down the tick of a clock, good sir, and my horse shall so deal with you that all the village must cry out upon your slimness."

The big man, who had little command of his temper, — a thing I have observed often in men of his quality, — now burst out into a great passion.

"Sir," said he, "my men shall carry you to the pound upon the spot. Do you mock the law, sir; God be my witness, I am the law, and no plague-stricken townsman shall pass through Finchley while I draw breath."

"Sir," said Master Wolf, still very civilly, "as for your drawing breath, I doubt not it is always a labour to you — and hark ye, as for your law, I mind it no more than the crack of a nut. You talk of the sickness. Know, then, that I have left seven dead in the house I come from. Nay, you will find the spots upon my own body, as I will show you an I come back from York. The best of the night to you, master. 'T is like to prove hard on God's earth when they shall dig a hole to put you in."

With this he let his cloak drop upon his shoulders, and when the Constable saw his face — which was, as I have said often, the ugliest face man ever wore — he turned tail upon the instant, crying out that a devil had come to the village. At the same time Master Wolf tipped him a blow with his booted foot, and so planted it upon his flank that he lay sprawling upon his hands and knees, while all the lads gathered round and shouted out that he was taken with the pains.

We, nevertheless, made haste to ride out of the village, and we had not got very far upon our road when the fields began to be shaped to our view, and a world created at the first

winging of the dawn — as though the Lord had opened the door of heaven to look down upon his handiwork. And so we made the hill at Barnet: Master Wolf content because the danger lay behind us; I glad as never man was, since they had put me upon the road to see my lady again.

CHAPTER XXII

MY LADY CALLS FROM THE WOOD

We drew rein in Barnet to beg a cup of milk and a loaf of bread from a hag that was abroad as soon as the dawn; and when these were gotten, we asked her of the road beyond the town, and especially to the house of my Lord of Quinton, which lay at Potter's Bar. For answer she told us a strange tale — so strange that I was of a mind not to hearken to her at all. But Master Wolf, who knew of these things, leant a ready ear until she had done.

"You 'll be from London, masters," said she. "Ay, surely, 't is many of your quality that has gone by here this summer long. But you 'll find no road to-day, hark ye, for they have the sickness in Potter's Bar, and it has come to Stabans," — by which she meant St. Albans, — "so that they let no more pass; and even great dames must lie in the woods like cattle until their health be proved. But

yesternight, there came one in here to tell us that my Lord of Quinton had three sick men in his house, and was gone away to Oxford. God have mercy upon us all, I say. 'T is the judgment of Heaven, masters, the great and dreadful day. Oh, woe to them that have bairns — as I have! Who shall give them bread when I be gone? Ay, Lord, that I have lived to see the year!"

She fell to sobbing, as many a woman did in those times, even upon little provocation; but we had no ears for her distress, only for the news she told of sickness in my Lord of Quinton's house. Of this we talked while we rode away to the Woods of Hadleigh, wherein we meant to lie awhile, and eat our bread, and sleep if that might be.

"I will not hold it from you, Master Hugh," said Israel, "that this times ill with my intention, which was to carry Master Ford's letter to Potter's Bar this very night. Yet if the Earl be gone away, then surely will there be no spousals of my lady before the second Sabbath, unless it prove that she be gone with him, and they are all at Oxford now. Of that we must learn presently. Until the time be come you shall lie in the

woods here while I pass on to the village, and gather what I may in gossip. It is possible that this hag speaks truth, and that the road is barred. But they will never look to find Hugh Peters at a bivouac, and I make sure it is for you safety."

"Israel," said I, "whatever your wish is, let that be done. God knows, my head has been a-wandering since you brought me out of the King's house at Hampstead. I am like a lad newly come to his play, and troubled to know what game he may put his hand to first. But in all I do, your love for me is never to be forgot. Nay, I know not why you love me so, Master Wolf."

"Sir," said he very quietly, "'t were odd if one who may never know what it is to get a child of his own should not answer when a son be found for him. Never spake they a gentle word to me in the old time, Master Hugh. As God hears, the mother who bore me was the only one who did not turn from the man with the devil's face. You talk of that which I have done for you. Ill indeed if my service end there. I am the sucked orange, master; but let them who cast the skin away beware lest they trip upon it. I

speak of one who is hated by you. The Lord send that I reckon with him soon."

This was a word beyond my understanding; but we had ridden up to the edge of the wood now, and we saw that a guard of warders was set around it to make sure that those who passed in did not come out again until a bill of health was given to them. They told us very plainly that we might enter if we willed, but, said they, "Sirs, the Lord knows when leave will be given you to go forth." None the less were our minds fixed upon the purpose, and so we passed them, old Israel making bold to whisper in my ear that, had he the mind, he would ride over fifty of them for a cup of ale.

We were in the heart of the woods now, and ever and anon we saw tents such as soldiers use, pitched in the glades and groves and sheltered places; or the carriages of rich folk, made for the nonce habitations wherein the great dwelt. Here and there trees painted with red crosses were to be observed, these being tokens that some poor creatures lay dead of the plague beneath the sods. All of which made us exceeding sorrowful; but being come, we must on; and presently we

entered a little glade, like to a bower beneath a wide-spreading beech, and watered by a rill which was very fresh and sparkling, as though it bubbled up from some hidden spring. Here we tethered our horses, and having drunk a long draught at the brook, we ate our bread and then would to sleep; for the day fell mighty hot, and even in the shade the air came scorching to the lungs.

Fatigue lay upon me then like a burden. My limbs ached with the riding; I had the dust of the road in my eyes; yet was this very fatigue in some sort a pleasure; and never, I vow, was I better pleased than when I stretched my limbs upon the turf, and felt the soft grass beneath my head. Nor was I conscious of the moment of losing sense, or of my coming to it again. I remember that I lay watching a green canopy of leaves above my head, and that I thought the sun to be very white and large in his orb as I viewed him between the branches, and then for a little while I did not see him; but opening my eyes once more, I beheld the same thatch of leaves, but no sun. A great cool was in the air now, the chill of the early night, and all the woods were red with the

shining lights of the setting. For my part, I was stiff and cold with my sleep, and I turned round to speak to Master Wolf, wishing to know if he waked. But he was not there, and a loud call brought me no answer from the neighbouring thickets. I made sure then that he had gone out toward the village of Potter's Bar, that thereby he might get the tidings; and when I had waited a little while, I ventured to walk some way — but not very far — from the horses, still calling him.

I had walked thus it might have been a hundred paces from the glade before any voice answered mine. Indeed, I was upon the point of turning back again, when, from a bush upon my right hand, I heard some one call very merrily, "Master Wolf, Master Wolf!" And my surprise is to be imagined when, turning round sharply, I beheld my lady herself, habited still for riding, but very white and dusted in her dress, and laughing at me — ay, as though I played some Merry Robin in the wood, and she was mighty pleased with it.

"Master Wolf, Master Wolf!" she mocked again; and the wench who was with her

taking up the cry, they fell to laughing like a pair of schoolgirls, though not unkindly, for presently she came out of the thicket and held out both her hands to me.

"Oh, surely," said she, "here is my friend Hugh, come a-camping to Hadleigh. Foolish boy, to be abroad at such time; and yet, upon my word, Master Hugh, I am very pleased to see you."

I bent and kissed her hands; and it seemed to me in that moment that the forest was my Eldorado, and that the earth and sky and waters were aflame with the lights from the golden city.

CHAPTER XXIII

I WITHHOLD THE LETTER

My lady withdrew her hands from mine presently, and turned to walk a little way through the woods with me. There were a hundred things upon my tongue, both questions and answers, but to my discomfort I found none of them ready; and as for the letter which Parson Ford had written, it lay against my breast like a burning parchment. Nor was she any the readier to put off the distraint between us; but she walked with a slow step, and stooped often to pick the buttercups while she walked. Only the serving-jade was merry, and to her I spoke first.

"How do they call you, girl?" asked I.

"If it please you, sir," said she, laughing the while very sly and cunning, "if it please you, sir, you shall call me as you will."

"But that pleases me ill," said I; "surely your name is Kitty."

"'T was so at my baptism, master," said she; "yet I have been called so many names since then that I am become like a hound who answers to the whistle. Do you but whistle ever so gently, sir, you shall find me at your bidding."

"Nay," cried I, "that is no office of mine; if any must pucker his lips, let it be Master Ford, who has done it often, I doubt not."

The wench tossed her head at this; though she could not hide from me her cheeks, which were red as rosy apples. As for my lady, she began to laugh very merrily.

"Oh," said she, "and what is this of Master Ford?"

"God knows," I answered, "save that he would stand well in the remembrance of your maid whose name is Kitty. Yet if this be the wench or another, I am at a loss to tell, mistress."

The jest put us upon a good footing of talk, and when the girl had run away from our laughter I turned to my lady to speak of more serious things.

"Marjory," said I, "odd that we two should walk together in the woods again, like boy and girl born dumb. They told me you

were gone away to Oxford — upon what errand I may not say."

She walked a little further in silence, keeping her eyes away that I might not read them.

"Hugh," said she, of a sudden turning round and looking me full in the face, "is there anything in the grove here which brings a day of the old time back to you?"

"Oh," cried I, standing stock-still upon the instant, though the blood was hot in my head, and my tongue trembled with expectation — "oh, my lady, if it be the day of which you speak, then do I remember it well. For it was a day upon which two children, childish in their years, yet grown man and woman in their love, played together in the arbour by the fish-pond of Warboys. And there they builded a little house for themselves, and prayed that the light of God might shine upon a home of theirs; and that going henceforth together upon the way of life, they might find a world of their affections, neither narrow nor sunless, — a world which should be peopled with the children of their pledge and outlast the plainer day of life, and be a world to them through all their years. Oh, well do I remember that day, mistress, for I have

dreamed of it often in the times of my banishment, and my misted tears have shown it to me again as a picture painted upon a window that is perished and broken. Many a time over the voice of the tempest and the cries of them that hunted me, have I heard the words 'Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.' Nay, how should I forget that day while life be still mine to remember?"

We had come very close together by this; and in my heat of speaking — for I had a wondrous tenderness toward her in that moment — I found that I had somehow got her hand again. Nor did she resist me now, only uplifting to mine a face rosy with a flush, yet sad still in the eyes, as though doubt lingered to plague her.

"It is your whole wish to be bound by that pledge you gave?" she asked coyly.

"Marjory," whispered I, "let me first ask thee, hast thou no desire to remember the day we think of?"

She did not speak at once, but her trembling fingers began to unknot the lace about her throat; and I, seeing what she would do, helped her, so that presently her pretty white neck was laid bare, and I beheld an amulet of

gold there, shaped like a little golden box. This she had the will to open, but so much did her fingers tremble that she could not get at the catch; and it was long before our clumsy efforts caused the lid to fly up and the contents to be shown. When at last we came by them, they proved nothing but two dirty scraps of paper.

"There," cried she, bidding me take them, "is there any thought of that in thy memory of the day, Hugh?"

I put the papers together, and when I had read them, not once, but twenty times, there was no more surprised man in all England than Hugh Peters. For that which she had kept about her neck so long was the leaf of the book which Tom Honeydew had torn the day he married us; and there was written upon it his testimony that we were man and wife, not only in the eyes of God but of the law.

Long I held the paper like a precious thing, scarce daring to look at little Marjory now, or to speak all my thoughts. When release came to me, I made swift to take her in my arms, wherein I held her as though never more should she escape that embrace. Nor was

she coy in the moment — nay, nor unwilling, for she lifted her lips to mine, and our arms linking us together, we remembered that we were man and wife, and forgot all else in the entrancing pleasure which was ours — the gladness of the new day which had risen upon our enduring night.

The sun was almost sunk in the west before we two found our tongues again. A fringe of crimson light yet hovered above the horizon, painting it with fiery colours; yet from these the gold now began to fade, leaving but the dull pink hues, and, above them, the sober greys of evening time. In the woods themselves the birds had already gone to roost; and only the cry from some camper's tent, or the wail of the sick, or the blast of a horn away by the northern road broke in upon the stillness of the hour. As for myself, I dared not to speak of present things. It had all come upon me with such bewildering suddenness; I was so surprised by it that I knew not whether I imagined it or did indeed hold my little wife within my arms. Well had I been content to sit there until the sun came up glowing in the heavens again; but my lady, who was ever quick

and clever beyond me, soon made haste to remind me how things stood with us, and in what a place of peril we found ourselves.

"Hugh," said she, drawing a little way back from me, but continuing to hold my hands, "dear husband, what folly is this that we sit here together forgetting all we have to do and all the hurt others would do for us! Any hour they may bring them to look for me — both my brother and he who bears thee little love."

"Ay," said I, "that is well thought of; yet I know not, little Marjory, how it comes that thou art in the woods of Hadleigh at all. They said that thou wert ridden away to Oxford, and, God knows, I did not wish to hear that."

She was silent awhile after this, but presently she lifted her pretty eyes to mine, and began to tell me all that had happened, and to speak more fully of our lives than ever she had done since we were met again.

"Hugh," she asked, "what have they told thee of Sir Nathaniel and myself?"

"Oh," cried I, "that is soon answered. All the world said that thou wert ridden

away to Potter's Bar to marry him in the house of thy brother, the Earl."

She laughed at the tale, but a little sadly, as though it were no matter for the jest.

"They told thee that," said she. "How well the world loves a lie when a woman is to be hurt thereby! Didst hearken to them, Hugh?"

"Nay," said I, "there was none to speak for thee."

"And my acts told thee nothing? Oh! what a simple boy is this who plays a man's game with the eyes of a little lad! Dost not see, Hugh, that I have set my wits against him who came from France that I might hold him silent until the King's pardon could be had for thee? Nay, I will not say that I have not liked him a little, for he wears very pretty manners, and long I thought he meant well to thee. Nevertheless, if they have reported that it would go to such an end, they talked ill. Hast never stopped to remember that Captain Goulding is newly out of Paris, wherefrom he brings tidings of thy work? Did he but lift a hand, he might send thee to the scaffold. How, then, should I seem to be other than his friend, until that

day at least when I could get the King's ear and say that thou wert no spy from Paris, but a good lad whose sword and heart he might surely count upon? And so for thy safety I was deaf to their gossip. Then came the sickness, and all was undone. The King went to Salisbury, and my brother the Earl, hearing from Tom Honeydew of the jest we had played, sent for me to come to Potter's Bar. I doubt not he likes thee but ill, Hugh, and that thou hast now two enemies in the place of one. Nor may we look any longer for Sir Nathaniel's favour since thou hast broke from his house and gone he knows not whither. They tell me that the Earl has sworn already to kill thee should fortune put you both upon the same road. Nay, dear husband, we are become dreamers again, and the little house we build will surely tumble if thou hast no courage of thy love to carry thee through so many perils. But I am at thy side now; and, God knows, if thou be willing, no danger nor threat shall carry thee from me again."

It was good to hear her speak so, and I thanked her, as lovers will, with kisses upon

her pretty face, ay, even upon her eyes and hair and cheeks, holding her like some precious burden long wished-for but newly gotten; and, Lord, there never once came into my head a thought of the great station she had come to, or of the gulf of place and money that lay between us. But she seemed to be my little Marjory of Warboys again, and as such I spoke to her.

"Little wife," said I, "well do you say that I have been blind, and my eyes like a lad's, that I have not seen these things nor even dreamed of them. Yet why, if Sir Nathaniel has all this in his mind, did not he leave me to the King's men, who surely would have done his work for him?"

"Oh," exclaimed she, "if thou dost not see that, never hope to be a cunning man, my Hugh, nor to play the game of life as others play it for thee. Surely the King, and those with him who sit like beggars at the doors of Louis of France, fear that thou hast some tidings of their intentions, and will tell them presently to all the world. They fear to bring thee before the judges, Hugh — yet not publicly; so that if any constable puts his hand upon thee they dare not say

him nay. I knew well that thou wast in safety at Windsor from all that were in power there. It was an old trooper of thy acquaintance who went near to undoing thee. But they had set Israel Wolf to watch thy room, and he it was who got thee from the castle. Then Sir Nathaniel made promise that thou shouldst find shelter in his house; and I said once more that it would be a respite for thee until the King could be told. Thereafter I went to Whitehall, but with no success, and must at last speak the word that thou shouldst go to France until thy pardon was to be had."

It was all clear to me now — both her cleverness in the plan and her love for me. But it stung me a little that a woman should be so discerning where I had proved such a witless lad; and I was vexed to silence while she told me how that, her brother having sent for her to Potter's Bar — she not having gone there on any business of the spousals at all — it proved that he had fled from the sickness the day before she rode into the village. And, being frightened by it herself, she rode away again to a cottage in the woods, meaning to rest there

until her brother sent a messenger or Sir Nathaniel was come in as he promised.

"This is no day to quarrel with them now, Hugh," she said, "but only to plan for the hiding of thee until the day be ripe. I make sure that thou wilt find the Earl no more gentle an enemy than the man of France; and it would be an ill day did they find us here in the woods together. Of all that, however, we will speak when old Israel is come back, for he, I make sure, is thy friend. It grows full dark now, and you know not what dreadful sights and sounds are to be heard in these woods when the sun is set. Let us go hence, dear love, and remember only the morrow of our affection."

She rose at this, and, I holding her hand, we two dreamers went through the woods together.

CHAPTER XXIV

I WOULD PLAY NARCISSUS

I SAID farewell to my lady at the door of the keeper's cottage, and then ran back to find old Israel that I might tell him, ay, with words a many and glad heart, all that had happened since he had left me. My dear wife willed that I should return to our place of bivouac, there to sleep until the dawn. "But," said she, "you shall look for me at sunrise by the five elms, and, perchance, sir, you shall find me with news both of my brother and Sir Nathaniel." Nor could I answer except to kiss her hands and to tell her that never one loved as I had loved, and would love while my years were.

There are hours of joy in all our lives, I make sure, when we do best to be alone in some place, be it the privacy of our garden or our closet, where none can hear the words we speak nor mock the little things which are the outcome of our exceeding content. For my part, I was very willing to find myself in

the darkness and the secrecy of the forest that night. God knows how light was my step and what follies I told myself while I ran from thicket to thicket in my quest of Israel Wolf, and of the surprise I was to bring upon him. Often, indeed, I stopped to whisper my story to the sky above me, as though some answering message would be given back to me when I cried, "She loves me! — my little wife remembers." Never had I thought that a place could be so beautiful as those woods of Hadleigh and the cottage where my mistress lay. In my foolish fancy I would think of her as a queen of the elves, sleeping there in a bed white with the whiteness of angels' wings; and from the heaven above a star sent down its light to make golden her unbound hair, and to banish the night from her face. The very forest was a heavenly place to me, so that I said I could make my home for ever in it, and ask nothing of all the world but to live my days upon the soft carpet of the grasses with my lady's hand in mine, and her kisses warm upon my lips.

It is to be imagined how thoughts such as these quickened my step and brought blood to my veins; yet I was ever one to up

and down like a burn in April; and I had gone but a little way through the woods when a voice of my own doubts began to whisper to me and to ask me how I stood that all this content should be mine. I could not forget that our night's work was so much play of children, well enough for the hour, but promising nothing for the morrow. "At dawn," said I, "they may come for her and hear that Hugh Peters is at Hadleigh. It is even possible that the Earl will use his power to make Tom Honeydew's work of no avail. She will go to the King again then; and I — Lord, no outcast shall find less pity." For what was it to me that they feared to clap me in the jail at Newgate the while my wife was taken from me and I was writ down a spy so that any man might profit by my death. Nor could I put it from me that my lady had confessed to some little liking for the man who had done me this hurt. Nay, I remembered my life and station, and began to wonder that any woman could find a kind word for me or look twice upon my face.

This reflection vexed me sorely, and I stood to think upon it, resting awhile at the bank of a deep pool. Well might I wish that the

sun would shine and let me play Narcissus; yet not as he played, but only to ask myself if the glass should bear me any hope, or tell me that my lady played with me. For that were possible still. I knew long since the report they gave of her at Windsor — both of her love of jesting and of her fine airs before those who sought her out. "Lord," cried I, "what if this be but a pastime to her wherein she may beguile herself until her man be come?" Had she not confessed to a little love for him? I had that in remembrance, ay, above all else of the night, and it was gall and wormwood to my mind. "Lord," said I, "send this French rogue where he and I shall cross a blade in fair fight." It seemed to me that all my life henceforth was in this man's keeping; for how should I be content in my new happiness while he lived and she loved him a little as her own word told?

These were the doubts that came to plague me while I stood by the pond and the night stalked swift through the woods. Silly fellow that I was, I would remember none of those things which might have been set down for my consolation, but only those which ministered to my foreboding. It was ever in my

mind that I had been bred one of the Lord's people, which all the world now mocked. Ill that I, who had lived a soldier's life, and not that of a godly man — at least to my discomfort in little matters — must now be branded with the iron of this common slander. "If," said I, "fortune had not dealt so ill with me, I might be wearing a laced coat and jingling my spurs like the best of them." God knows I had no tongue for all the weary business of religion which Master Ford professed; nor did I remember to have sat out a parson's discourse when I could avoid it. Yet my lady called me "psalm-singer" to my face, and reckoned it as rare as a fast day to see me laugh. How, then, I asked, will she be content to live with such a one? Will she not, when she has grown a little cold in her protesting, fear that I shall be the usher of her pleasures, the whip upon all those fashions which she has lately made her own? I blamed myself that I had not given the lie to the report already, nor promised her that she should continue as she had begun since Charles Stuart was come to his own again. Indeed, I was half of a mind to send into London that Master Ford might help me to

a better station in my dress; but this I soon scouted, telling myself that I was a man, and that if she would not have Hugh Peters as he was that day, then, better that she should go her way and forget that she had known him. "But," said I, "in the matter of her little love for the man of France, God be my help, I will reckon with that so soon as there shall be opportunity."

I had been occupied long with thoughts such as these when a bell at Barnet struck ten of the clock and awoke me to a sense of my folly. I bethought me that Master Wolf would be waiting at our sleeping-place, and mighty concerned if I was not there to greet him. So I took heart and ran on again. It was then that I had cause to remember my lady's word, how that the thickets would show strange sights when night was down. Every step I took carried me to some scene of desolation and of suffering. By here and there I saw whole families huddled at some tree's foot, the men of which would cry out as I passed, bidding me stand off lest I should carry the sickness to them. Or, again, coming suddenly upon a stagnant pool lying in a cup of the brake, I beheld a poor wretch lap-

ping the water as a dog might have done, yet praying all the while that the Lord would have mercy upon his soul. Anon a man, near naked, burst out from the bushes upon my right hand, he having a flaming torch in his right hand, and this he held up high above his head while he ran on like a wild beast, screaming out loud that he was taken with the pains. Him I followed long by the light of his flambeau, and when that was hid from me, I could still hear his woeful cry raised like the wail of some animal come out of his lair at the setting of the sun. Never until this moment had there been brought to my mind the truth of all those reports which Master Wolf and Parson Ford had made me of the plague in London; but now I believed their word and repented of the wish I had so lately uttered that I might have been born a king's man and worn his reputation. God knows, the thought of death was very bitter to me with my lady's kisses still burning upon my lips.

I began to have a great fear and dread of the forest now, a fear which set me running as though the sick man pursued me; nor did I once stop until I espied the place of our

encampment, and beheld old Israel himself busy by a great watch-fire he had kindled. He saw me before I had come through the trees, and ran a little way out to meet me. On my part, I was too gone for want of my breath to give him any greeting, but held his hand the while he looked about as though to see them who pursued me. When he had satisfied himself that we were alone, he led me to the fireside and pointed to the supper which lay broiling upon the faggots.

"Master Hugh," said he, "I had begun to think that I must sup alone. You have news, surely, that you consent to fast so long?"

For answer, I told him all as readily as I would have told my own mother — and as gladly.

"She is my wife, Israel," said I; "and how should I think of hunger or thirst when I was in the woods with her? Oh, God be thanked! she remembers all, and there was never any forgetfulness, and she had the leaf of the book worn like a jewel about her throat, and she did but wait for me to speak, and she likes the French rogue but little, and I will reckon with him — dost understand?

there is no gladder man than Hugh Peters in all England this night."

He laughed a little at my readiness; nor was he willing to lead me on overmuch.

"Good tidings for a truth, Master Hugh," said he soberly; "yet lover's tidings, and scarce to be writ down for circumstance. I have learnt already that Mistress Marjory came to Hadleigh for no purpose of the spousals, but only at her brother's bidding. That she remembers the day you name is a welcome thing for me to hear. It remains now that we ride away from here as soon as may be possible, lest they put a bit upon the venture I have in my mind. And so I have cooked a little meat against your coming; and the horses, which you stabled so prettily, are now ready for bridle."

He said this very slyly, meaning to rebuke me because I had run away from the glade and left the beasts to the first hand that should be put upon them. When I remembered the thing, I had some shame of it.

"Nay, Israel," cried I; "wouldst have me love with no stomach, like him Will Shakespeare spoke of in his play? I did but go a little way through the forest when

I heard her call to me; and could I remember aught after that? Perchance thou hast loved thyself, and wilt know how these things come to be?"

I had forgot that he was a man with a face upon which no woman might look; and it cut my heart to hear how bitter he spoke the reply.

"Nay, Master Peters," said he, "woman's love is not for me, no, nor man's, except it be thy love, which goes warm to my heart even in the winter of my life. Let us speak no more of this. We have other work to do, which will not wait. And first, of the man out of France: 't is said that they look for him at Hadleigh any day, and that he is concerned overmuch to hear that thou art abroad and gone — he knows not whither. I have thought upon it long, and have found a place of hiding for thee, which is none other than a house under the shadow of Paul's, where none will seek thee in this day of the sickness. Thither we ride to-night; and when we are come so far, then will I tell thee more of that which is running in my mind — both for the manner of getting thee a pardon and of sending this French spy to his home again. Mean-

while, let me see thee eat, for thy face tells of hunger. I doubt not thou hast had little care for thy stomach this day."

He set food before me when he had done speaking; but I, rather than thank him for what he promised, was vexed because he spoke of my leaving Hadleigh.

"Israel," said I, "there have been few hours of gladness in all my life, and such as God sends me, those I will not turn from. I have given my word to meet my lady at the five elms before sunrise. You will not say me nay, old friend? What matter that we lose the night if you be here? God knows, I value your help above a king's company. And I could not ride away with no word passed nor message sent. It seems to me that I have found my home in these woods. Well could I be content to live and die here if Mistress Marjory were at my side, Israel."

Master Wolf shook his head cunningly, and began to stir a faggot of the fire. Then of a sudden he turned away from me, saying, —

"Master Hugh, I lied to you just now. There was a day when I, too, loved the place where a woman lay. That was long ago; though your words bring to me a remembrance

which I thought to have forgotten. We will even lie the night in Hadleigh, though one of us pays thereby with his life. Would to God that I could rest with such thoughts in my heart as you hold in yours. Oh, my lad, there is naught else in all the world like a woman's love."

It seemed to me that there was a sob in his voice when he spoke, and his sorrow lay upon me like a burden. But I fell to sleep at last with him lying near by; and while I slept a voice cried down from heaven that God had looked upon the face of Israel Wolf and made it to shine with the celestial light.

CHAPTER XXV

PARSON FORD FINDS A MERRY OCCUPATION

I WAS up at the first grey of dawn; yet not so soon as old Israel, who broiled me a breakfast while I dressed. The morning air waked me to fine spirits, so that I could laugh at every little thing; but more particularly at Master Wolf's cunning, when he would to help me with my clothes and the combing of my hair. Nor did I care to eat much — only a little of the meat and a draught of the ale; and when this was down, and we had washed in the burn, I gave him God-speed, and ran off to the trysting-place.

"You will not forget, Master Hugh," he had said, "that they look for Sir Nathaniel this very day. Prudence should be your best friend on such a journey. You will find me here at sunset, ready with the horses. And let me counsel you: lose nothing of the occasion, but beat the iron while it is hot. She

will love you none the less if you do but command her love a little. Upon my word, there is many a lad between here and London town who might gape with envy at the figure of Hugh Peters this day."

I was very glad to hear him; and I ran off, asking myself if indeed it were true that I might play Narcissus at the pond, and get content thereby. Never had the thought come to me that I was such a man as a woman might fancy; but now that he had named it, I took courage of the hour and was at the five elms, all expectant and little doubting, just as the sun found the place and began to warm it with the white light of a summer's morning. There was a little bower here, removed some way from the place of the common encampment; and I bethought me that Marjory had named it because of the privacy we should enjoy therein — which pleased me mightily. But she had not come when I found the elms; and near an hour went by before I espied her, most prettily dressed, walking very slowly toward the glade. And at this I remembered my own haste, and told myself that she could not love as I did, or never would she lag upon such a journey. Indeed, my heart beat at her

coming, and the blood coloured my face, while my tongue was busy with twenty things I might first whisper to her — yet could find none to please me.

She walked up, I say, looking to the right and to the left, but not to the place where I stood waiting. When at last I stepped out to greet her, she made pretence of being surprised thereby; as though Hugh Peters were the last person she had come to the five elms to see. And this vexed me not a little.

"Well," she said, while she stepped back from my embrace; "so you are here, Master Hugh?"

"Marjory," cried I, "what means all this — you know well that I am here. Have I not waited for you since the clock struck four?"

"How," she cried; "you have waited for me? Nay, by the look of you when I came up, I thought that you had lost a crown upon the grass, Master Hugh, and were even searching for it."

"Oh!" said I, "God forbid that I should strut like these king's men do. I walk as the Lord taught me, my lady; and will better it for no one."

It was not to be hid from her that I was

put out, very justly, at her coldness; and this shamed her after a while so that she laid her hand upon my arm coaxingly.

"Nay," she said very merrily, "'t was not to quarrel that we came into the forest this morning, my Hugh. Forgive me if I do jest with thee."

"Thou art forgiven already, little wife," said I; "there is nothing in all the world I would not forgive thee nor do for thee."

"You mean that, dear Hugh?" she asked.

"God be my witness" cried I.

"Then you shall walk a little way into the forest with me, and by and by I will even let you sing me a psalm."

I went all hot at this, and had it been anyone else I had been mighty angered. But with Marjory that was not to be. She could plague a man, and yet so cunningly and with so sweet a grace, that he must cloak his vexation and bear himself before her as one loving the jest.

"Mistress," said I, "there is that upon my tongue of which I would make mention to thee. Thou hast spoken often of me as one who loves the company of those that walk in the way straightly, worshipping God with

long discourses, and holding it a sin so much as to look upon a woman, or to do any of those things which all the world does nowadays. I was never a man like that, and I would tell thee now —"

"Hugh," she cried, turning upon me suddenly with all the laughter gone from her eyes, "Hugh, art going to deny thy religion as Peter did — and for a woman's love?"

I could have bit my tongue that she rebuked me so; but I knew that I had deserved it of her; and I stood dumb with flaming cheeks and bent head, I make sure.

"Well," said I, after a spell, "it was for love of thee, lest, peradventure, thou shouldst turn from me as one who would chain thee to a home of gloom, Marjory. Nay, God knows, thy will shall be my will if ever the day come that I can find a house for thee."

She burst out laughing now, but not unkindly, and presently she took me by the arm and led me further into the brake; the while she said: —

"Surely I begin to know thee well, Hugh, and how that thou wouldst stand friend to all the world, if only thy tempers would let thee. We are like children playing a game, and

this pleases us best when we dream the most. Have we not our day of love before us? Bring the morrow what it may. Nay, I could make believe that we were at Warboys again, and that these were the woods about my father's house."

It was a merry conceit, and she had forgot all her seriousness when she spake it. From that time we were, I vow, but two children gaming in the brake, or gathering posies of the marsh marygolds, or playing catch that catch can, yet very gently, so that, whenever I caught her, she would rest in my arms to be kissed; and whenever she caught me — which was no great labour to her — she would tell me again that my eyes were blue. Nor could I find the colour of hers, but must look and look again to make sure. And so the morn sped — yet Lord! how quickly the lovers' hours passed! For the bell at Barnet struck nine of the clock while we were yet hot in the game that only lovers may play truly.

The chiming of the hour put a little cold upon our ardour, she remembering that she was to breakfast in the cottage at eight of the clock. She had contrived it so that I should be brought in with her and none know of it.

"I do not think that my brother will ride in to-day," she said, "or if that be so, then shall we have timely news of it. As for Sir Nathaniel, he should be at Oxford now, busy upon the King's affairs. I doubt not, Hugh, that he will repent him of his anger presently; and if he will not, then I have still friends to help me. Nay, I do not mistrust him altogether, for he has ever professed friendship for me, and I could not be displeased at that."

"I doubt not," said I, mighty stiffly, "that you were very pleased with so proper a man."

"And why not?" said she. "Is there born yet the woman who could shut her ears to the fair things which a man speaks? I like him very well, my Hugh, and will like him the better when he learns to love thee even a little. Perchance I shall yet find a way to compel him so to do, for there is something in my mind — how, dost thou not wish to hear me? Silly boy that is up in his angers like a bird on the wing! I will even keep it to myself, then, and if thou wilt hear thou shalt come to the cottage presently to beg it on thy knees."

She kissed her hand to me upon this, and

ran away through the thicket, leaving me sore troubled and peevish, yet with no good cause of quarrel against her; which vexed me the more. I was content to say for a little while that she should wait long before Hugh Peters came to beg any favour of her; and as for putting myself upon my knees, Lord! there was no woman in the country who could bring me to that. But when I saw her so girlish and sweet and full of her play, running lightly over the sward, yet stooping often to pick a flower as she went, I repented of my resolution all on the instant, and began to follow after; calling often to her that I had a word of good argument with which to answer her. But she ran the more at this, and went swiftly like a hunted thing, so that I should never have overtaken her but for something which she hap'd upon in her flight, and was held thereby to the place in a sudden amusement not to be passed by. When I came up she had a finger to her lips to command my silence; and so I trod the grass upon the tip of my toes and stood by her presently to enjoy the thing with her.

Forsooth, it was a merry play which she had come upon, and I wondered no longer

that she stood to see it out. For there, seated side by side upon the green at the foot of a great oak-tree, were Parson Ford and little Kitty; and never did two lovers at a booth cuddle more diligently. As for the wench, she lay almost her length upon the grass, resting her chin upon her hands, while the parson was busy plaiting bluebells into her hair. Often he would stop to look round about very foolish, and when he kissed her, Lord! it was but a snatch upon the tip of her nose, just as a hen may peck at the corn which is flung. I could have cried aloud in my laughter that he should ape the lover thus, but little Marjory pressed my hand to still me; and so we watched them long, until, indeed, Master Ford espied us and jumped up quickly like a school-lad caught in naughtiness. Then we both ran out, unable to hold our laughter any longer, and my dear wife took both the parson's hands and raised her pretty face to kiss him.

"Oh, Master Ford, Master Ford," cried she, "what a day is this! That you should deceive my maid, and I be there to see it done!"

"Come," said I, chiming in merrily, "and

what says Paul now? — 'I would that all should be even as I am.' Oh, Master Ford, Master Ford, this is a black day's work."

"Nay," said he, speaking now for the first time — yet never had he worn so red a face — "nay, I have found a daughter — the Lord be praised, I have found a daughter."

We laughed the more at this, greatly to his confusion, and presently little Marjory, feigning to be angered, stamped with her foot upon the ground, and cried mighty sternly, —

"How, Master Ford, you do not mean well by this wench. For shame, sir — and she an orphan and unprotected that hath need of an honest man's arm. What! would you play the rogue in my very house? A daughter, indeed. Upon my word, she shall find many fathers to play such a game — but you that I have loved! Oh, I burn with shame for you!"

He could suffer our jesting no longer, and he walked away all confused towards the cottage, whither we followed him merry in our approval of the play. Nor had we gone very far before old Gideon stalked out from a place of ambush in the trees and raised his hands in a gesture very doleful.

"Pillars of Grace!" cried he, "that it should have come to a wench with him! The Lord forgive him, for he hath kissed her twenty times upon the nose. And that, mistress," said he very slyly, "is no abiding-place whereon to kiss any wench."

CHAPTER XXVI

WE HEAR A GREAT PLAN

It was a merry meeting in the cottage, and the food and drink helped us all to great content. I had never seen Master Ford in so gay a state, nor so ready to forget his condition. As for the wench, she went to her work as brazen as the best of them. For a truth, she called the parson "father," which pleased us mightily; since it made a Papist of him, and that was a *rôle* he was new in. Only when the food was all done and the heat of the day lay heavy upon the forest did we turn to speak of serious things; but chiefly of this, that a place of safety should be found for me the while Marjory could bring that plan of hers to the execution. And then I told them of old Israel's offer, and how that I was to ride to Paul's — a thing which frightened them exceedingly.

"What?" cried the parson; "he would take thee into the town where men fall dead

in number like the leaves. Surely, that is a very pretty plan to put thee where neither king's men nor French spies may trouble thee, Hugh. Nay, old Israel lacks his cunning, and has become a dreamer. I tell thee, it is a city of death to which he would carry thee, lad. No man knoweth his hour, nor his day; and all he asks his neighbour is of the bill which they make at the pit's mouth. Happy is he that can breathe God's air, even in such a place of refuge as this."

"You speak a good word," said I; "yet how shall I be better for breathing God's air at Hadleigh when any day may bring them who will hunt me — ay to my death, as you know well, Master Ford? Hast any better plan than Israel's, that you should hold him in blame when your own tongue lacks counsel?"

He was all up in anger now, just as he used to be in the old time when I was brought to the block of a false quantity in my Latin.

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed he, "what frowardness is this which sets son against father? Would'st deny me to my face? Out on thee for the blockhead I have bred! Nay, thou shalt follow my plan at the cudgel's bidding,

sir. And I will even read thee a lesson in manners before the day is done."

I was silent upon this, choking down my anger for love of him; yet not very readily. Perchance, it had come to a good quarrel with us but for my dear wife, who turned it very prettily with a memory of the morning.

"Oh, Master Ford!" cried she, "how shall we need a lesson after that you taught us at the tree's foot? Surely, we are ready pupils."

It was a hit, upon my word; and when Master Ford had coloured up because of the remembrance, he took a drink of wine, and then fell to laughing.

"Ye are rogues both," said he, "and I know not why I concern myself with your affairs; but since I am come, I will even carry out my intention, which is" — here he paused and put on his accustomed gravity, looking hard at me the while — "which is to make you man and wife upon the spot."

"Master Ford," cried I, amazed at his words, "is there any need of that?"

"My lad," said he, kindly enough, "if thou hast no other testimony of thy marriage than the leaf of the book which my lady holds, it

is likely to go ill with thee when the Earl shall carry the matter before the judges. But if I be there to make it known to all the world that thou hast found a wife as God and the Church hath ordained, then mayest thou hold up thy head before all the country."

It was a mighty clever thought, one which had never come to me in all my reasoning about the business. Yet no sooner had he made mention of it than I saw the advantage we were like to derive thereby, and the exceeding wisdom that had led Master Ford to his intention. As for my lady, she was all joy at the first, jumping up to kiss the parson; but after a while, she had some shame of her readiness, and fell to a little coyness.

"Come," she said, "there be need of two in any bargain such as you name, Master Ford. What if one of them be not willing?"

But the parson was never a man to jest upon holy things, and he rebuked her — to my great content — very sharply.

"Child," said he, "this is no hour to come to the Lord with a laugh upon your lips. Thank him for those infinite mercies which have carried one you love through so many perils until this moment. Well, I see that

ye are both as little children running blindly you know not to what, except it be to the darkness of pleasure, which shall hide the peril from you both. Yet if ye be not both earnest upon this purpose, avowing that God hath drawn you together here that your exceeding love may be witnessed against all the world, then will I have no say upon — nay, I will ride back to London this very hour."

The rebuke was well spoken, and I knew that she had deserved it; yet must I feel my love waxing strong while he upbraided her, and I took her hand presently and held it in my lap. Shame on me if I had forgot in that hour the difference of our station and the high place to which fortune had called her; yet here she was, content to come down from the castle of her dreams that she might remember Hugh Peters, whom all the world had cried upon and the very dogs had hunted. Oh, shame upon me, I say, if I had not loved her with all my heart and soul when I thought upon her kindness and how that she had but me now in all the world; and, God knows, but ill equipped to shield and protect her from the hurt they would have put upon her.

The parson made an end of his rebuke,

and delayed no more to carry out his purpose. And there in the little room of the cottage with the sunlight to make a golden pavement, and the song of the birds, very merry, through the unglassed windows, he knelt down to offer a prayer for us; his fine voice sweeter to my mind than any music of the King's singers; and his face made noble in that earnest pleading with his Maker. When the prayer was done, he read the form as it is to be found in the second prayer-book of King Edward; and thereafter he pronounced us man and wife, calling old Gideon and the woman that kept the cottage to bear witness thereto; so that no one, not even the king himself, could have undone that thing which he did that morning.

He married us, I say, and then, mounting upon his horse, he rode away to London, again saying that he would return upon the morrow to let us know how we should put the thing abroad, with any other counsel he could devise. We watched him, standing at the cottage door; and there was this in my heart as he went, that I had found a friend in him such as is given to few upon this earth.

"The God of our fathers bless you both," cried he, turning about in his saddle at the mouth of the brake, "and put His shield before you and give you light to lead your steps."

And so he rode away, and left us to our love. Nor did we stand long at the cottage door, since we knew that one would wait to give him God-speed at the thicket's edge; and we would not willingly have spied upon him for the second time that day.

CHAPTER XXVII

I DRAW SWORD AT THE BURN SIDE

It was six of the clock before I so much as let my dear wife draw her hand from mine after that Master Ford had left us in the cottage, but the hour being struck, I remembered me of Master Wolf; and said that I would run and bring him to the place that he might know of our new intentions, and sup with us rather than at the bivouac where he waited. For we were well intentioned now as to the plan we would follow, being come to this: that I should lay hid at Hadleigh so long as might be possible while my lady rode away to Oxford where the Court was; there publicly to avow that she was my wife and to beg the King's clemency. Save for this business of the Paris man and the tale he told of me, I had hoped for the venture, trusting all to my little wife's cleverness, she being powerful to persuade a man, ay, above any I have known. But we had heard nothing of Sir Nathaniel

Goulding the while we were in the wood, and God knows what a shadow lay upon my life while he was abroad and full of his angers against me.

I left Marjory, I say, at the gate of the thicket, yet very unwillingly, returning often to kiss her, and then again finding some word which I must speak to her — ay, though I was to be gone but the half of an hour. Perchance she had come with me but for the things which were to be heard and seen in the woods when night opened the door of death, and wickedness and dreadful sights were abroad in the brake. I remember that she wished me to go with my sword drawn and a great pistol in my hand; the while I laughed at her fears, asking her if Hugh Peters was so changed that he must cry out like a wench did he but hear a word of threat, or spy an over-bold fellow by the way. And so kissing her to content, I ran on, more joyful than any man in England.

That day, for a truth, was the one I would the soonest live again of any day in my eventful life. There were times when I stood still in the silence of a glade or hollow and looked all about to know if I were indeed

in my own country, if the things I saw were real or the creatures of my fancy. But yesterday I had gone with broken step and hanging head, knowing that I was outcast and exile; to-day I could walk with the best of them, holding myself boldly as if to tell all the world, "She is my wife." Not that I could yet venture to raise my eyes, as it were, to a prospect of the new condition I might — did God will — enjoy as my lady's husband. Nay, I put it aside from me as a precious thing to be toyed with yet not to be handled. Enough for me to have my lips warmed with her kisses, to carry remembrance of the tender embraces she had given me, to run on, nay, I swear to dance on, touching the bushes with the tips of my fingers like any urchin in his running; and promising myself, ay, that I would make old Israel open his eyes and give him such a show and proof of my love presently as he had never had in all his days.

It was, at a ready venture, the half of a mile from the cottage to the glade wherein we had tethered our horses; yet so quickly did I go that I was at the burn side, which is but a hundred paces from our bivouac, while I was yet hot in my plan. Never once did I,

as I went, look at them who passed by me or ran out of their hiding places to change a word of news. When I came to the burn itself, I doubt not that the same haste would have carried me over, but for a man who stood on the bridge and was halted there, seeming not to know whether to cross over or go back. At any other time I had passed him without remark, but as I stood to wait his pleasure, I did not fail to observe that he was habited beyond ordinary for one of my own countrymen, having the black frock and the broad hat of a French priest; which, indeed, I soon saw that he was. For the matter of that, he appeared to be no less astonished to see me than I was to find him there upon the bridge; and when we had watched one another, it might be for a minute, he called out loudly in the French tongue, and was answered by a voice from the bushes upon the further side of the brook. Then I knew who his companion was; for the second voice I had heard often, both upon the road to Windsor and again at Hampstead. Nor was I at all surprised, after I had heard it, to observe the bushes open and Sir Nathaniel Goulding himself step out upon the bridge.

He saw me at once, drawing back upon impulse; but when it was plain to him that he could not conceal himself, what must he do but feign a pleasure to see me and cross the bridge with both hands held out.

"St. Denis," cried he, "but we are well met, Master Peters. No other brings me to the town of Barnet, I swear. That I should run upon you in the woods — *sacré bleu*, 't was ever my fortune to find you at the lucky moment. Yet methinks you are not overpleased to see me, *ami*. Body of John, dost come from playing the gravedigger, lad, that you should stand there so."

My blood was hot in my veins at this, and I drew back from him, thanking my God that I had found him in the woods.

"Sir," said I, "my pleasure I keep for my friends, and if I must play the gravedigger, I will the first find a body which has need thereof. I pray you stand aside from the bridge, for an you do not, we will even see who has the right of passage. Oh, surely we are well met this night, Captain Goulding! Draw back your hands, I beg of you, for I like not their colour. There is water in yon burn if you would wash."

I had hoped that this would move him to come to the business I intended; for God knows I had but one thought when I beheld him, and it was this, that we should reckon then and there. But he was ever a man to be cunning in the argument; and now he burst out laughing at me, repeating the jest to the French abbé who stood with him. Presently, the two of them went back over the bridge and engaged a little while in dispute, with many gestures in the manner of them of Paris. I heard the priest telling him loudly, in the French tongue, that he had never seen me before; which he repeated many times. On my part my hand was even then upon the hilt of my sword, and I lusted for the fight — ay, as I have never lusted in the heat of battle.

The two stood in dispute, I say, and when it was done they both came over the bridge together; the Captain first, and very merry, as one who has heard a fine thing. He did not seem to remember that I had affronted him, for he walked up to me without any word of parley, putting his hand boldly upon my shoulder.

"Master Peters," cried he. "if you will

ride with me as far as Barnet, I will tell you the best jest you have heard this many a day. Name of the devil! If I had not the abbé's word for it, I would not believe it even upon oath. But he speaks for you, declaring that you are not the man that has come out of Paris to do us a mischief; and what he says I must heed. I would that I had known it when first I clapped eyes on you at Epping. St. Denis! I had been spared three months of unrest about you, while you — nay, man, you should have played the lover the quicker. Not that you have been a laggard in your business, friend Hugh. Oh, I hear great tales of your employment these three days past. And hark ye, a word upon that: pluck the blossom while you may, for others have picked petals, and you are like to get but a sorry flower if you do not hasten. You understand me — nay, look not so glum, for verily, I mean well to you."

He said this with a smile very evil to see; the while the French abbé was there to point the saying with his laughter. But I had come to the full of my anger now, and when he spoke so of my dear wife, I stepped back and struck him upon the mouth. All my hate of

him, all that I had suffered by his doing, and strong above this, the remembrance that my lady liked him a little, gave me the devil's arm to strike the blow. God! I thought that I had killed so did the blood flow over his silvered vest and upon the hand he raised to shield himself. Nevertheless, he was only skin hurt; and after he had stood silent before me, it might be for the half of a minute, he gave a great oath and drew sword. The Lord be my witness, it was a moment I had lived for since he had carried me to the castle at Windsor, and with a devil's cry like his own, I made my blade leap that I might come to the engagement.

It is in my memory that the sun was upon the line of the lower trees when our blades crossed. A deep red light, playing about his face, shone down from a sky hung with crimson and red at the zenith, but curtained below with the fringe of the forest and the clouds of night. Save for the splash of the burn there was a great silence in the brake. The very wind had died down until the aspens were fallen to a breath of sleep. We had chosen for our standing-place a bank of mud baked hard in the sun, which had made it like

the floor of a court for tennis players; but here the advantage was with him, for he stood somewhat above me. Quick as they call me in play, I could not forget that he had learnt the art of fence in Paris, where all are quick. Indeed, we had thrust but twice when I said to myself that it must be no boy's work, but a reckoning heavy to the last line. And he was mighty cool from the beginning: casting a taunt in my teeth of my being a farmer's son, and bidding me sing him a psalm, which provoked me to lose myself early in anger; and, if this were not enough, there came to me a vision of my little wife standing in an open place of the thicket. I knew that it was but a vision, yet the remembrance which it commanded — that I might die by this French rogue's hand after all — was like lead upon my mind.

They were wont to say in Paris, at the school of my master, that I had as pretty a touch with the rapier as any man in France. It is not for me to extol their judgment in this place, save to explain the sorry figure I cut that night at Hadleigh. Perchance, had I but set about it with less heat, I had been more than a match for this Captain Gould-

ing; but I was old in my impulse and full of hate of him, which made me gnash my teeth like a brute thing, and roar out to all the forest that I would surely kill him. He answered me with a sneer, which racked my temper and made me fly at him so wildly that I went near to striking his sword from his hand. Twice I cut over and lunged in sixte; there was no trick Maître Antonio had taught me which I did not employ — but, Lord! savagely and ill done, like a lad at his lesson. As I live, I could feel his laughter shaking upon his blade: his touch was firm and sure, like the touch of a man who has grasped victory. I can see him to this day looking me through and through with his steady eyes; the sun crimson upon his face, the jeer upon his lips. God! it was a humiliation beyond all bearing to me that he should prove my master, after I had waited so long for the reckoning. And all the while the French abbé was beseeching him to forbear, running hither and hither like a man distracted, or kneeling down to pray God that He would bring us to our senses.

I was fighting savagely now, with breath quick and firm hand. The beat of my foot

upon the ground fell heavy like a hammer; my veins were full of blood and outstanding. If there were moments when I must ask myself, "Shall I ever see my dear wife again?" other moments in which I said, "She likes him a little," quickened my arm and warmed my heart. I knew that I had the will to drive my blade through him — ay, twenty times — again and again, until his body should be still upon the grass at my side. But never was there shield more sure than his sword. Like a wall of stone it stood betwixt us. I slashed at him and was parried with a bend of the wrist; I rushed upon him and was driven back to the engagement with the touch of the master's hand. I played a feint and was answered with the exhortation to remember myself: Lord! that it should have been he who spoke so to me!

"Master Peters," was his word, "I see plainly that you want your breath. Go a little more gently, I beseech you. Did they teach you no better than that in Paris? Give me but an hour and I will find a farmer's lad with whom you shall have a merry bout — and more at your ease. Observe, I turn by sixte, octave, and half-counter. St. Denis! only

a child would have made so ill a stroke as that."

I had driven him back a little at this time — back until he was almost at the burn's edge. For the first time I had the heart to believe that he should eat his words. The message of his blade, read upon my arm, seemed to tell me that his jeers belied him, and that he faltered. But that was a sorry guess, and went to my undoing. For at the very moment when I cried out that I had him, and played from the high line to the low, he met me with the counter, and sent my sword flying in the air. Then, and with the same turn, he thrust me in the shoulder, and I felt the steel running deep into my flesh with a horrid pain which turned me sick and dizzy. It was odd, I swear, yet long minutes passed, and still I did not know that he had worsted me. Nay, I stood like one dumbfounded: my eyes upon my sword, which lay shining like a silver snake in the grass; my hand pressed to my shoulder because of the hurt. He, on his part, had lowered his point that he might watch me more closely; and I remember that the French abbé was at his side imploring him to have done with.

"Oh," said he, "that is as Master Peters wishes. I have no cause of quarrel with him. *Dame!* it is a pleasure to me to teach him how the sword should be held. Does he wish it, we will even play the game again."

"Sir," said I, "it is my wish," — and with that I made a step to pick up my sword; but the blood gushed out of my wound when I stooped, and I fell sick and dizzy upon the green. Before I could rise again, the old abbé's arms were round about me, and he was comforting me with a voice gentle as a woman's.

"My son, my son," cried he, "look up to God, for surely you are dying."

"Oh!" cried I, "how shall I look up to God when he has killed me?" — and so saying, the woods and the men and the crimson of the sky were hid in darkness from my eyes, and I fainted.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I HEAR A GREAT THING OF SIR NATHANIEL

My swoon passed quickly. When I opened my eyes again I was still pillowed upon the abbé's arm, the while Captain Goulding stood watching, he having both his sword and my own in his hand. I saw at once that they had torn my vest from my throat, and had bound my wound with a strip of linen rent from my own shirt. There was a great pain in my shoulder as though one had touched it with a glowing iron, and I was very weak in my limbs; yet it seemed to me that I was not to die, and I know not whether I took comfort or despair of this. The abbé was the first to speak to me.

"Courage, my son," cried he; "the good God has saved you. Oh, surely you will live now."

He gave me to drink of a cordial water in a horn rimmed with silver; and when he had bathed my forehead — ay, as tenderly as a

woman might have done — with a little water from the brook, he passed a word to the other, and got a gesture for his answer.

"Come, Master Peters," now cried Sir Nathaniel, "I am sorry to see you thus; but you will not hold me in blame thereby. It is but a scratch, as the abbé says. Can you contrive with our help to get so far as yonder town? — a chirurgeon shall dress you. I beseech you forgive me for the hurt I have given."

It was a kindly word, and all my anger seemed to have run out with my blood, so that I had the will but not the voice to thank him. As I live, I had never spoken so to him had he been prone upon the grass, and I ministering to him. When he had done, they gave me the support of their arms, and, being careful to go with slow steps, we gained the edge of the wood, and passed by the pickets upon the showing of the captain's bill of health, and his voucher that he would answer for my hurt being no more than a sword's thrust. The house which he had named lay a little back from the road upon the outskirts; and here he brought a chirurgeon out of Barnet, who made light of the cut I had

got, and gave me good relief with a lotion of oils.

"Sir," said the fellow, "you will please to lie the night in this house, and to make no movement which will trouble your wound. I promise you, do you but rest a while, that you shall be yourself when a week has passed. There is nothing touched to set up the fever, and you are a young man. Oh, sir, there is no drug against a sickness like a lusty and a well-kept youth. I beg you, be content to rest until I shall pronounce you factus et reductus ad sanitatem. Odds, sirs, 't is as fine a case for the post hoc to follow upon the propter as ever I saw. Lucky to see such a thing in these days, when men are struck, not with any visible sword, gentlemen, but with the sword of the Almighty. Who shall stand against that? Nay, you answer me by your looks; yet if you would have a sure and certain preventative against the plague, gentlemen, I can even sell you one for the matter of a crown. Yon is a scratch — medicus nihil aliud est quam animi consolatio. Let the young gentleman lie twenty hours in the composition of melodious trifles, nugæque canoræ, as Horace hath writ, and his mistress

shall spy neither faltering step nor weak heart."

I laughed at him upon this, for he was a mighty pompous fellow, and his promise to give us a preventative against the sickness for a crown was a ridiculous thing to hear. But at the mention of my mistress it came upon me very suddenly that little Marjory would be even then waiting for me at the cottage. This gave me so sudden a start, that I might well have burst my wound again. Nor dare I tell them how it stood with me; but could only lie back upon my couch and swear that wound or no wound I would be with her before the morn. In which resolve and plan — very foolish both — I hearkened to Captain Goulding when he drew a chair to my couch and spoke with me.

"You hear, Master Peters?" cried he. "Twenty hours upon that bed and afterward where you will. Believe me that I regret this night's work. 'T was none of my doing, as you can bear witness. And I will even tell you another thing, that I care not now, except for your own sake, whether you be free or prisoner. It is plain to me that all the talk of your coming here upon this French

business was foolish talk on the part of those who mistook you for another. As for myself, I confess that I weary of this England of mine and all that I have seen and heard here. My heart is in the French city, where the heart of every gentleman must be. God helping me, I will even cross the seas this week to return no more. But you will find my servants ready to do your bidding, and, I pray you, command them as your own. It is well known to me in what employment you have engaged yourself since you came to Hadleigh. Forgive me if I had stood well with Mistress Marjory. You will understand without word of mine, Master Peters, that a woman's ear is not to be despised by him who embarks upon a venture needing many ears. I can jest with you upon that matter the easier since I have a wife of my own in Paris and three children, who might well stand with your mistress for sisters. You are a bold fellow, and your courage is very pretty. Let an old man conjure you to add a little thought to it sometimes; for the head is stronger than the sword, and will be while the world runs. I shall carry to Paris good remembrances of our meeting; nor will you, when all is done,

think so ill of the man who brought you out of Epping. To-night I ride to London. Permit me, at least, to go there as one with no cause of quarrel against any man."

He held out his hand to me, and I swear all my hate of him changed to love upon the instant. Hurt and anger, and that which he had put upon me at Hampstead, what were these to me when I knew that he had a wife in Paris? Lord, thought I, what a thing to tell Marjory, and to bring her to shame that she liked him a little! It were as though all my strength came back to me at the saying. I had the will to leap up from my couch and jump about the room; nor did I any longer withhold my hand, but thanked him as though he had been my own father.

"Sir," said I, "it is very plain to me that I have done wrong by you. Let there be no more remembrance of it. I will think of you often among the number of my friends. You shall not find me ingrate if ever the day come. Nay, you make me forget my pain. I doubt not, if it were fought over again, and I had the high place of the bank — but of that we will not speak."

He smiled very cunningly when he heard

me; and after we had taken a little supper together, and I had thanked the French abbé for his kindness, they rode away to London, leaving me to the care of the hag that kept the house. I had never meant from the first to pay heed to the pompous chirurgeon; and now, when the place was still and the hag gone to her bed, I made bold to rise from my seat and to see if I could walk at all. Though I must crawl upon my hands and knees, I swore that I would cross the wood to my little wife's side. It was very sweet to remember that I might lay my head upon her shoulder and be comforted in her kiss, and feel her gentle hands about my wound. When I stood up at last, it was to find myself a little dizzy in the head and stiff in my limbs, like one who has lain long upon dewy grass. But I pressed my hand firm against my shoulder, that the wound might not gape again; and taking up my sword, though not buckling it, I unlatched the door of the house, and so came out into the strip of garden which borders upon the Great North Road.

It was a summer's night, lacking moon, but with so great a brightness of the stars in the heavens, that one might almost have seen

to read print. I made sure that there would be no one abroad at such an hour, and I went boldly to the gate of the garden and so out on to the highway. There I had taken, it may have been, ten steps when some one called to me, pleasantly, and with the voice of a man who would pass me good-night.

"Well met, Hugh Peters, upon my word," cried the man. And so I turned round to find that one of the King's guards had his hand laid upon my shoulder, and that he was no other than the trooper I had seen from the window of my bedchamber at Hampstead.

And, as I live, I could think of nothing else but the cunning laugh with which Sir Nathaniel Goulding had left the room to ride away to London.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CLOAKED MAN IS KNOWN TO ME

THERE were five troopers with him who had taken me; he, I saw, being the captain of the company, as his trappings showed me. Whether they had just ridden up or had been halted there against my coming I knew not, nor could I think. It were as though a bolt from heaven had dropped to strike my heart dead.

"The King fears my tale no longer," said I to myself; "and so they carry me to my death." All the treacherous cunning of it, the dreadful thought that I was cut off from my little wife forever, that I had known but one day of life in all my years, stupefied me. Not a word could I speak when the guard touched me; I had anger neither against God nor man. I was like one struck dumb by misfortune, robbed even of the mind to grieve, silent in the very weight of my misery.

The guard greeted me pleasantly, I say; nor could he understand my silence. 'T was a common thing for such as him to make suffering a bed-fellow and death his playmate. He named me coward, I make sure, and began to have some contempt for me in his heart. He did not know that my wife's kiss was still warm upon my lips, that I longed for her then as man has never longed for anything on God's earth; no, not for gold, nor place, nor station, nay, nor life. He found me but a sorry knave, meet for the gallows, a common spy. If he gave me a kind word, it was of his pity, not of his love.

"Come, Hugh Peters," said he, "would you make me think that I have laid hands on a wench? God's truth, did I set up your face for a bogle in yon field, there would be no rooks left in all Middlesex. Take heart of it, man, and go like a merry fellow. 'T is as easy as crack a nut any time, and all the jades in town there to see you dance. Dost fear the rope? Out on you for a craven!"

"Sir," said I, for his words stung me. "Perchance I fear death no more than my fellows. If it be God's will that I must die, then I will show you whether I be craven or

no. You have heard, I doubt not, that I carry the hurt of a new wound, which your usage of me has gone near to burst again. Yet could I hold a sword in my hand — but that is idle talk, for I am weak, and sick, and without friends, as you see."

It was far from me to beg his pity, I vow; but I shall ever carry a remembrance of Captain Harry Seymour as one of a true heart and a friend. No sooner did I make mention of my wound than he sprang from his horse and stood by my side, bidding a corporal light a lantern that he might see my face.

"Master Peters," cried he, very kindly, "I swear upon my honour that I knew nothing of this. You have a hurt, you say — how came you by that?"

I told him of the affair in the wood, and how that Sir Nathaniel had sold me after passing his word.

"Yes," said I, "give me the high place of the bank, and I will worst him to-morrow. He is old in cunning. I had but a lad's head, and there was one waiting for me — but that is my affair, sir. Deal gently with me for God's sake, for I have been used very ill."

"Nay," exclaimed he, "'t was a sorry trick

to pass his word and then to bring us hither. Believe me, Master Peters, I have no heart in this night's work. But carry you to London I must, for to that am I sent. Let me put you upon my saddle until we be come to Barnet, and I can get you a cup of sack and a second horse. You may be sure that we find the business ill enough, and are like to remember it. They say that the town has now no grave big enough for its dead. The grass grows within the very gates. Who shall ride to London at such a time and say that the morrow will not find his body in the pit? God bear witness I am not over given to thoughts of my condition, Master Peters, but willingly would I pay a hundred guineas to be quit of this employment."

It was plain to me that reflection upon the danger of riding into the city was no new thing to him; and the faces of the others in his company were an echo of his foreboding. I heard a low talking, and many a whispered, "Lord have mercy upon us!" which was the cry in that day of them who were afflicted. But Captain Harry was quick to pass the thing by; and when he had lifted me upon his horse, he held to my leather and began to

walk by my side, feigning to be merry and of a good heart.

"A plague upon all this!" cried he. "Who knows that a bolt may not drop from heaven and strike us dead before we come to London city at all? Were I in your shoes, I would hope the best from such times as these, Master Peters. For where shall you find a hangman in a city of dead men, and how will Jack Ketch wet his weasand with a drink of physic when naught else is to be had within the gates? Odds, sir, 't is a very pretty wager to lay that you shall not hang this three months; and I will even condition it with you — to be paid to them you name if the thing be lost, or to be got from your assigns shall it come to me."

All the guard laughed at his humour; and one they called Corporal Jack cried out that Master Harry Seymour was ever a devil in the matter of a wager; but another said, "God save us all when we be come to Holborn Bars," and to this all echoed a loud "Amen." Nor could Master Harry bring them again to merriment, but, very silent and doleful, we rode up to the inn at Barnet, and there called for the ostler.

This was about the hour of midnight, when by ordinary custom the town should have been long abed and only watch-dogs barking. But in those dreadful days all was out of the common, so that night brought neither sleep nor silence. The town was, for a truth, full of clamour and confusion when we rode in. So thick was the press of coaches and of waggons about the inn door that we must bawl over a barrier of wheels, or stand to watch serving men run hither and thither, some with torches, some with wine-cups — all very wan and anxious like men long lacking beds. Scarce a minute went by without bringing now a horseman, now a coach up the hill where is the road to London; and Lord! to hear their tales of the city, how that the dead lay in the very gutters for want of pits big enough to hold them — the while men and women flung themselves into the waters in their agonies — was a thing to still the heart. Nor did we find it any better in the parlour of the inn itself, where men stood together in a great press — some to tell that further passage by that road was impossible — others again, very hot and excited in their talk, swearing that they would go on, by God.

We saw plainly enough that we should get no shelter there; and Master Harry, though he declared that he would drive them out with the flat of his sword presently, must perforce go out to the stables and command that wine should be brought him there.

"And hark ye, my man," cried he very boldly to the landlord; "make haste to serve me, or I will even burn your house about your ears. Dost not see that I am abroad upon the King's business? Harry Seymour is my name, and, by my soul, you shall remember it long an you do not bestir."

I was sorry for that man — so did his company plague him; and what with the clamour in the street and the flare of the torches and the cries of the horsemen, I seemed to be in a world afar, beholding all things but dimly, and awake not at all to my condition. But I remember that Captain Harry led me to the stable-yard of the inn, and was about to enter a stall there when a man, whose face was hid by a black cloak, stepped before him and greeted him very civilly.

"Sir," said he, "if you have any love for your life, I pray you will not enter there."

"And why, sir?" asked the Captain very proudly.

"Because, do your eyes follow the light of my lantern, you will even see the bodies of three men lying in the straw. Hush! put it not abroad; for what can the master of this place do when many fall dead at his door, and others are struck with the cup at their lips? God's word, ye will be well advised to get upon your horse again and to make for London with what speed you may."

I have never seen a man more astonished than Master Seymour when he looked into the stall. And I think he was frighted, too, for he drew back at the word and walked some paces down the yard.

"I know not who you may be, sir," exclaimed he, "but surely you have done me a service. Could I but get a horse, I would hasten on as you say — yet how shall a horse be found?"

"Captain," said the other very quickly, "I have business in London myself, and if I may ride there so far in your company, the horse that you lack shall be at yon gate before the clock strikes again."

The Captain thanked him, and called his

men from the parlour. But I stood wonder-struck and speechless.

For he who spake the promise to Master Seymour was none other than old Israel Wolf, whom I had left at dawn in the glade of the woods.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN THE GRASS GREW IN LONDON CITY

THE man went upon his errand, I say, and Captain Harry fell to pacing the stable-yard, he being now low in spirit and scarce ready with a jest even for the wenches of the inn. But so much as he lost heart did I gain it. The coming of Israel was like a gift of blood to my veins. Never once since they carried me from Hadleigh had I thought until this time of that which day would do for me. Death and the omen of death robbed my mind even of the power to think at all. I said that I was come at last to the snare they set for me. The King feared my tale of Paris no longer. He was content now to send me to Newgate, there to be tried for that same offence which had brought my uncle to the scaffold. Idle to cheat myself with any hope now that the guard had got me and was upon the point of carrying me to that prison whence

I might never hope to go forth, save it were to the place of my death at Tyburn. But now, at the instant, a great freshet of courage burst upon my heart. I knew not why; I had no thought of plan or plot. This only would I remember, — that the man with the devil's face was to ride with us to London. Perchance I held him, as a child holds his father, to be all powerful in the hour of need or adversity. I care not how it was — save to remember that all the lights of the inn seemed of a sudden to be bright to my eyes, that the very whinny of the horses was music to my ears, that I said ever, "Master Wolf is here, Master Wolf is here."

My new temper, you may imagine, was not to be hid from Captain Seymour. He had left me to stand by the door of the yard while he walked to and fro, but now he came up and was mighty astonished that I had rallied so much.

"Upon my word, Master Peters," said he, "a draught of sack is very pretty physic. You put me to shame with your smile — I beg you carry yourself as well when you pass by Tyburn field presently. Odds, man, what matter, — to-day or to-morrow, this year or

next year: a cup or two of wine the more, a kiss from a wench's lips, a full purse or a beggar's burden, an hour of love or of a woman's tears,— will you weep for these when the earth be upon your eyes and all the trumpets in the world blown together impotent to wake you? Consider my own case — I that am lusty and bear a woman's message in my heart, what justice is it to bid me ride into the death-place to-morrow that they may put a rope about your neck? Nay, mine is the misfortune, as you must see, comrade!"

I told him that it was — very willingly, and was going on with my lack of wit to speak of many things when we heard a voice bawling to us from the road without; and all the guard being now come together, we found Master Wolf mounted upon a black horse and leading another by the bridle-rein. I had forgot all pain of my wound in the pleasure of seeing him, and I made bold to mount without any help; but Israel himself bent over the saddle when I was up, and the others being busy with their horses, he said very softly, —

"There is a pistol in the holster, Master Hugh. When you shall see me for the second time, you will know how to use it."

He said no more, but fell back to ride with the Corporal. And this was in my head to perplex me, — that he should speak of my seeing him for the second time. But I held my peace; and very excited and wondering, I beheld the lights of Barnet high behind us, and heard Master Seymour's word that we should be in London city before the dawn.

There were many folks abroad upon the road to Finchley — both horsemen and poor families in their waggons. This was the season when the rich had for the most part gone their ways, as far as might be, from the sickness; but the poorer people, willing to stand by their affairs until all hope of trading was taken from them, were but now beginning to flee the pestilence. Nor do I think that we overtook one traveller who had his face toward London. It were as though a great battle had been fought at some place by the hills of Hampstead, and that these were the refugees we now happed upon, making what escape they could from the pursuing armies behind them. Not a word did they change with us; no, not a man, woman, nor child among them. If they had any surprise that men should be so bold as to go into the

death-place they had quitted, so well did they keep their eyes to the north that they never spake it. And it was woeful to see the line of dead that lay in their path, — here a man stark and stiff in the very hollow of the way; there a horseman with foot yet in the stirrup, but hand that would never draw rein again while this world should be; or anon, a woman walking very quickly, and crying to her folk that they should not forsake her, the while they commanded her to stand off the waggon, and even threatened her with their cudgels. Lord! it was a dreadful thing to behold, — this visitation which could rob us of our natural wills, and so change men — aye, and women too — that they were become like the very beasts of the field.

You may imagine to what a depth of foreboding sights such as these carried my companion and those who rode with him. He, who had railed upon me that I feared death, was now brought so low himself that he had no word for his tongue, but must go very silently like one dreaming an ill dream at the first waking from sleep. Twice I spake and had no answer from him. Odd, I vow, that I, who had as much to fear from the plague

as any of them, should find no thought of it in my head. God knows what danger of the visitation I had brought upon them, that must I share with them. Yet I rode the whole way making naught of all I saw, but content only to remember that Israel was of the company, and had spoken of my seeing him for the second time. This, perchance, was a solace of my exceeding folly. Had I been patient a little while to reckon upon my standing, it must have come to me that one man, whatever friendship he had for me, could but lose his own life did he set himself against the King's men who then held me. But of this I would not think; nor had I any care to remind myself that as soon as we were within the city Master Seymour might add to the number of his troop whenever it pleased him so to do. If there were any weight of gloom upon my heart, I set it down to the recollection that my dear wife then lay at the waiting-place in Hadleigh Woods, knowing not how it was that I turned from the gift she offered me of her love. And I prayed in my heart that I might hear her voice again, even if it must be on the morning of my death.

Well or ill, the image of my mistress

seemed in the air wherever I looked that night. The very stars shining down upon the city of death were, I said, the heavenly lamps upon which her eyes might even then be turned. I pictured her, in my fancy, running a little way out in the woods to seek for me, yet not far, because of the sights therein; or crying, "He will come when the clock has struck;" or telling herself that I surely loved her, and that misfortune kept me back. There was a conceit in my heart that tears would be warm upon her cheeks, and, God knows, I would have given half my years could I have come silently to kneel by her and bid her weep no more. But this was a dream born of the stillness of the night, and the darkness of the road, and that gulf betwixt mind and body which meditation may open. Nay, so truly was I, in my thoughts, at Hadleigh, that I forgot all — even my own peril, the men I rode with, and the pain of my wound. The poor folk in the coaches and waggons were no longer the cause of word or wonder to me. The gentle sway of my horse's body, the sweet air of the night, lulled me to a sleep which was not wholly a sleep, but only a resting-hour of the mind dulled already

by the heavy burden of misfortune. And I might even had ridden into London so, oblivious of all about me, even of old Israel, but for a sudden call from one of the troopers, who craved Master Seymour's leave to get a cup of sack at the tavern by the parting of the ways. This man's voice I heard, at the first, like a sound droning afar; but anon a bright light flashed in my face and brought me to an awakening. Then all my vision turned to darkness; and I remembered that I was a prisoner upon the road to Newgate Jail.

We had all come together again at this place, which was no other than the inn where Master Wolf and I had seen the man in the waggon, and crossed a word with the Constable of Finchley. A lusty beating upon the door of the house brought the landlord out very quickly to serve the soldiers; and while we stood in the aureole of light which fell about his window, I observed Israel deep in talk with Captain Seymour. But to me he spake no word, nor did I expect it. Nevertheless, I was mighty astonished presently when he gave a "Good-night!" to the corporal, and, setting spurs to his horse, galloped

fast in the direction of Hampstead. I had thought surely that he was to go with us into London; and when he rode away thus, he seemed to take with him all that had upheld me through the night. Nay, I could have cried after him, imploring him of his pity to bide with me yet; but so swift did he go that he had turned the bend of the road, and was hid from sight while the silly word was shaping upon my lips. I was still deep in my wonder when I remembered very suddenly, and to my confusion, his saying that I should see him for the second time, and would know, when he came, how to use the pistol which lay ready in the holster. And this brought me to such a new hope and excitement that I could scarce sit still upon my saddle.

"Master Seymour," cried I, bubbling over with talk, like men wild in a notion will, "does yon fellow carry so little that he would bed with the footpads of Finchley?"

"God's word!" exclaimed he, looking at the cloud of dust which yet whirled above the road, "I doubt not that he is own brother to them. Yet we are the better for his company by the horse you ride; and that is a guinea's worth, Hugh Peters. I am told to

inquire for him at the Sign of the Ship in Temple Bar Without. 'T would be a sorry gentleman of the road who would waste his time with such a fellow. Didst see how he covered his knave's face? Nay, surely 't is a gallow's bird we have escorted, and in the King's name, too!"

"Sir," said the corporal, who was now at my side, "'t is no gallow's bird but a plain, honest gentleman who goes covered for fear of the sickness. He has an affair which presses in the village of Hampstead, and would be there before the dawn. He bids us ride in to the city by the Tyburn Road, and so to Holborn, where, he says, we shall be like to pass the dead-cart by, and the pits they have lately digged. 'T is a fair word, and God grant we may profit of it. Odd that five must die because they would hang one. Yet it will come to that, Master Seymour, if the Lord show us no mercy this night."

He spoke very dolefully; and I could see his fellows waiting for the captain's word, as though he would go back now at the last. But he was no faint heart; and when the corporal had done, he turned upon him with

a loud oath, swearing that he would shoot the first man who made mention of the sickness again.

"What?" roared he, "you would have them cry upon Harry Seymour that he turned from the spots like a wench from a bogle? Out on you for faint heart! And you, Jack — God's truth, they shall drum you through the regiment with a farthingale about your boots. Would'st cry oranges at the Duke's house, man? Forsooth, you shall make a merry jade presently!"

The corporal hung his head when Master Harry rated him so; and the others being brought to obedience at the word, we fell in again, and began to go all very close together toward the common of Finchley. We had taken the eastern road at the junction, since this would carry us out in High Street, and so to Holborn Bars; but the nearer we drew to the city the more plainly did my companions show their displeasure. It was very clear now that Master Seymour, whatever his words, carried little pleasure in his heart. As for me, I was in a better mood than ever I had been from the beginning of it. The hurt of my wound and the gloomy looks of

my companions were of no moment to me. By what right instinct I know not, nevertheless it was in my head that old Israel would not have ridden away without good purpose. I began to wish exceedingly that I might behold the lights of the great city herself. There was a strong desire in my heart, that I might be among many men again, up and doing, with the clash of swords in my ears and a horse at the gallop to carry me. The secrecy of Master Wolf's departure was like physic to my brain, working upon me until I had the impulse to cry out aloud, or to lash my beast, or to talk incessantly of any trivial thing that came into my mind. Even Captain Seymour observed how changed I was, and must remark upon it.

"Come, Hugh Peters," cried he, when we had left the village of Finchley some way behind us, "I begin to think that I have done you a wrong. Odds, man, I shall tell them that you carried yourself like a very pretty fellow. And why not, I ask? Nay, we are as like as not to go into the pit before you, and that without any King's warranty. Look at yon light in the sky. God's truth, I love a beacon as well as any man, but I would

give a hundred guineas if I might pass those fires by."

I knew well what he meant, for the sky above the distant city was red and lurid, as with a running of blood before the heavenly throne. These were the days when they had lighted great fires in all the streets of London, if possible to burn out the pestilence from the air; and now we beheld their radiance of scarlet upon the great arc of the heaven above us. It was a moment of awe, indeed, when we halted for a spell, and looked down upon the mighty pit of death as into the very shades of hell itself. The lamps of London twinkled now in the windows of a thousand houses. We could observe from the hill-top the spot where Paul's lay; and it seemed to us that a terrible scorching wind was breathed out by the city, to come hot and burning into our lungs and to fill us with the pestilence. I wondered no more that my companions feared to go into that dreadful place; and I began to think of naught else but the raging death below and the cries then winging up to God from unnumbered tongues soon to be stilled until the eternal day.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT

We came into London past Tottenham Fields and the booths of the players, then gone to decay and to sorry desolation. Like men who had looked to behold very dreadful things, we were a little surprised at the first to find the city so still in sleep — for there were no fires lighted in these parts, nor were any watchers abroad in the night. Indeed, we rode a mile toward St. Giles before we saw anything which so much as told us that they had sickness in the town; and then it was but a house, all shut up and dark, yet showing a red cross upon its door, and the words "Lord have mercy upon us" writ there. We passed it quickly, turning to the Tyburn Road, where my companions, who had begun to take heart a little, drew rein suddenly and cried one to another that they must find a better way. There was a great fire lit here, and men and women drank

round about it; the while a cart was halted at the place, and the driver asked of them if they had any dead. It turned me sick in my head to see this cart quite full of bodies, not one of them so much as wrapped about with a shrouding, but all pitched together like dumb beasts in the slaughter. And it was worse to see the indifference of the common folk — how they continued at their bout and wickedness, no man seeming to remember that God might call him upon the instant to the throne of the heavenly judgment.

We had come into the city, I say, and had begun to think that they had told us an idle tale of its condition; but that opinion was soon changed. Every step we took now toward the gates carried us to some new and dreadful sight, the like to which mine eyes have never beheld — and, God grant, may never see again. There was scarce a house in all our way down Holborn Without-the-Bars that had not the cross upon its door. We heard the tinkling death-bell at every corner; the grey dawn-light showed us men and women — ay, and little children, too — all awake, as though they must know sleep no more until the sleep of death should come to

them. And, as if this were not enough of itself to wake us, we came often upon some poor wretch that had fallen down dead, even as he walked along the street; and, having none to tend him, lay all stiff and cold upon the sidewalk, or out in the hollow of the road itself for any coach to crush his body. Many a time that night did I hear a fearful cry come out of some house, and, following upon it, watch the flight of some sick man, who would run from his bed, and be held by none from going stark-naked to the streets — ay, even so far as the waters of the river, that he might cast himself therein. Once, indeed, a poor girl, wild in agony with her pains, came running out of a house by Gray's Inn Walks to lay hands upon the bridle of Master Seymour's horse, and beg him of his pity to save her from the grave; but he beat her off with the hilt of his sword, and, Lord, his face was turned white like stone, and I could see his hand trembling upon his rein.

"My God, Hugh Peters!" cried he; "did you see that? She breathed into my face, and her hand touched mine. What can save Harry Seymour now!"

I could not give him any helping word, and

Heaven be my witness that I was in no better state myself. What with the pale light of morning, and the dreadful crosses upon the houses, and the silence of the city (save for the cries of them in pain and the woeful ringing of the bells), it seemed to me that I had come down into a very pit of death, whence I might never go out, save it were to the pits then digged for the mighty multitude of bodies. God knows the things I saw and heard turned me sick and giddy, until I went near to falling from my horse. For this was a city stilled and stricken dumb in agony, a city where there was no thought of to-day, nor to-morrow, nor of the years after; a city where no coaches rolled — nay, nor lovers talked, nor fathers thought of sons, nor sons of mothers; but all turned one from another, saying surely that the end was now, and that God would speak presently, and the curtain of heaven be drawn back. Never once in this woeful ride did I remember that we were now within sight of Newgate jail, and that they would carry me thither before the sun was up. My mind would dwell upon nothing but the horrid recollection that I might have taken the sickness from the woman who

laid hands upon Master Seymour's bridle. I began to tell myself that I should cry out presently as she had done, or to ask if I had not the spots already on me. God! the very thought turned my blood to fire and sent me reeling in the saddle.

We were descending the hill to the church of St. Andrew Within-the-Bars when this foreboding came to a head; but anon, so soon as I could see the white stones of the prison of Newgate, I fell of a sudden back to a remembrance of my journey and of that which it boded for me. My wonder at all I saw in the city had been so great that never once until this time had I asked news of Israel, or recalled his words at Barnet, and the promise that I should see him for the second time. But now the thing again came back to me like a sudden blow upon my heart. The great jail, lying but the half of a mile from us, loomed up above me like some mighty fortress, wherein no voice of pity should be raised nor prayer be heard. "Nothing now," said I, "can keep me from the punishment that they have willed me to suffer. All the city will point the finger at Hugh Peters and tell how he is to be hanged before the month

is done." I knew that they had named me for a French spy, ay, that they desired my death exceedingly. Since old Israel was gone, I stood alone among them, with none to stretch out a hand to me nor to believe my word, but only to say that I deserved to die. This latter thought drove me to a sort of madness. I swore by God that they should not carry me to Newgate, though I died at their feet in the road. I began to upbraid Master Wolf, declaring foolishly that he had sold me. An overwhelming impulse to strike one blow for my life possessed me like a fever. God knows to what folly I had not come if our ride had been straight on to the gates and to the lanes of the prison itself. But that was not to be. I, who had merited nothing of my God but to die for my sins, was now to learn of His surpassing mercy and love. For He carried me forth in the moment of my greatest peril, as you shall see presently — ay, and no miracle that was ever heard of was more wonderful than the thing which I saw there at the foot of Holborn Hill, at the very moment when we stood upon the threshold of the prison.

It was full light now but a morning of cloud

and heavy air, there being no sun, though the hour for his rising was come. We had got so far as the bridge across the Fleet when the thing happened. There is here, as all the world knows, a great number of booths and fairs: Fleet Market, which is ever full of low fellows and the worst sort in the town, being upon our right hand; Snow Hill standing up before us. We held back our horses almost to the walk, for many men moved upon the bridge above the dirty river; and the tavern where the bargemen congregate was now awake to the day, and exceeding noisy. Master Seymour himself, who had begun to tell me to be of good courage for the hour was come, broke off in the word to learn how he might pass the press of waggons and carts, of which there were a full score in this very place. As for me, my ears were deaf to all that went on; the prison itself stood up before me; my eyes were set upon it as upon some haunting vision of the night. It was just then, while Master Seymour was crying to the waggoners to draw aside, that I beheld the wonder — sudden and quick and bewildering, like a flash of fire in the heavens. I heard a great shouting come up from the

wharf by the river,— a crying of many voices like the roar of a multitude. Anon, while the roaring was still in my ears, three men, half naked and dripping wet with the water of the river, came flying out of the tavern, bidding all to stand from them since they were surely struck. It was a horrid apparition, I swear, the naked figures with their long beards dripping upon their white breasts and their eyes staring as though some devil pursued them. Nor did they seem to know whither they were running, for they came headlong toward our troop; and one of them, catching at the bridle of Master Seymour's horse, roared to him to get down, for, by God, said he, he was bent upon riding to hell, and that quickly. Never did I see in all my life a man so frighted as the captain when this poor wretch, hot with the pains, laid hands upon him and began to drag him from his horse. Neither could the others of the troop help him, for two of them were in like straits; and a great multitude, crying to us for God's sake to strike the madmen down, was now gathered at the inn door, and began to press upon us, — a horrid crew of butchers and ship's men and keepers of the booths, all

stinking with wine and like to nothing but roaring beasts of the forest. Never in all my years did I hear anything to pass the bellow of their voices, nor see faces so savage, nor men so fierce. Mocking, cursing, fighting, they split up our little company as twigs may be blasted with a gun. For one moment I saw Master Seymour slashing at them with his sword; I heard the corporal call out that he was surely a dead man; there was a *mêlée* wherein you beheld many upturned and angry faces, and horses plunging madly, and the bright habiliments of the troopers, and, above these again, the gables of the silent houses with here and there a woman looking down upon the brawl. These things I saw in a flash, as one sees a house in the instant of lightning; but while the thing was still hot and going, someone clasped me firm about the waist and dragged me from my horse. There was a whisper in my ear that I should be silent and say nothing; they carried me swiftly into the tavern and to the garden beyond; and then, setting me upon my feet, the man who had me cried, —

"Master Hugh, I have come for the second time, and will leave you no more."

As I live, it was old Israel who spake the word. Nor could I answer him for very surprise of it. The whole thing had come so suddenly, the din and confusion in the street were so violent, the sullen faces about me so savage, that I stood for a moment like a hunted man who haps upon a parting of the ways. But this was no hour for wonder; and scarce was I upon my feet when Master Wolf bade me follow him and began to run down by the river side and into the very heart of the market. You may be sure that I did not delay to do his bidding, but fled with all the strength I had — ay, and so swiftly that some devil seemed in my feet. Lord! it was an hour to live, we flying like two that had wolves upon our heels, now doubling by the booths, now through the filthy dens which the butchers kept, now back again to cheat them with the ruse, now turning aside to avoid those places where the bodies of the sick lay; but on — ay, for our very lives, on while the sweat rolled in heavy drops from our faces, and our limbs went near to giving under us, and our feet were cut with the stones, on through the alleys and the lanes, past the bridge at Ludgate, past Bridewell, to the very

river's bank itself. Thereafter I know not how it fared with us. I had such a hurt to get my breath that fire seemed in my lungs; I remember that I saw old Israel running over the mud by the water and calling to a man that stood by a boat there. For a spell, I saw Paul's and the spires of the Minster Church; I can mind me that my feet sank deep into the mud of the bank, and that the air from the water blew very sweet upon my forehead. I know that I came up to the boat at last and tumbled headlong into it, lying there like a dead thing, and telling myself that it would be good never to rise again.

"Let me lie, for God's sake!" I cried to them; and so, aching in all my limbs, with my clothes torn and the sweat thick upon my face, and the wound in my shoulder burning with pain intolerable, I felt the boat rock upon the waves, and knew that we were free upon the water. Yet, Heaven judge me lightly, if it ever should be again that I must buy my life at such a price, then God bear witness how willingly I would die.

CHAPTER XXXII

ISRAEL TELLS OF A GREAT JEST

The boat was rowed out into the river, I say, and being come to the deep water, we found that a barge lay there waiting for the tide to carry her up toward Richmond. I had recovered a little by this time, and made haste, as Israel wished, to get into the cabin of the ship, while the man roped up his little boat and set to work with a great sweep to bring us out of that bight and beyond the Parliament house at Westminster. But it was not until Paul's had passed from our sight, and we, with infinitely great labour of the man, were come almost to the Bishop's Palace that Master Wolf would so much as quit the deck or speak with me. Only when he found that there was no pursuit upon the water did he command the fellow to do the best he might, and himself begin to tell me his news..

"Master Hugh," cried he, "I have been in many a pretty affair in my life, but never did

I see anything like yon. That a troop of the King's guard should run away from three butchers of the Fleet is a thing to tell in all the town. Word of God! they ran like rabbits from a dog."

"Nay, Israel," said I; "and well they might. Were not the three you name all stricken with the sickness?"

"Master Peters," cried he, very merry, "I will take leave to tell you that there was not a sick man among them. They did but leave their smocks in our hands the while they dipped their faces in the Fleet. Holy Job! they have as much sack in them as would fill a barrel. Didst see Master Seymour's face when Tom Robertson took him by the throat? 'T was as good as Joe Haines at the Duke's House — ay, and nothing ever writ hath made me laugh so well."

I was mighty astonished at this, as you may think, and I begged him to make it a little more plain to me.

"Lord!" said I, "it is a thing not to be understood by me, Israel. How say you: they were not struck at all? Oh, surely the town shall laugh at them presently."

"Ay," said he, "there shall be a laugh

heard from Lud Gate to the city of Oxford, if I have any word in it. Yet I doubt not, Master Peters, that a laugh would help us but a little way upon our road had we no other equipment. I have thought of that, and you shall learn from another when we be come to Richmond what plan I propose, and how it may serve you."

He fell to great gravity now, as he would sometimes; but after a spell he said, —

"Nay, but it shall help thee well, lad — thee and my lady; and some day, perchance, thou shalt learn to remember Master Wolf, and to think kindly of him as one that was thy friend."

"Israel," cried I, "speak not so. Art thou not my friend — ay, the best man ever had? Distant be the day when I forget thee, or hold thee in aught but a remembrance of my love. Nay, I have no other friend in all the country."

I spoke from my heart as ever I did to Master Wolf, and was mighty content to tell him of my gratitude. Well to have shame if I forgot what he had done for me.

"Lord!" said I, "what a day that would be did I lack love of thee, old comrade, who

hath stood by me in this the hour of my darkness when all the world was turned from me. For surely it is an hour of peril, Israel, and this is but a breathing space. Dost think they will follow upon the water?"

"Master Hugh," said he, very plainly, "if I had thought that, would I be here upon this boat? You know that I would not. Nay, I will wager that they are even now beating the market for you, the while soldiers ride out toward Tyburn and Whitehall. Dost give Master Seymour any credit of his wits? Out on the estimation! He is but a poor rogue that hath not the brains of a little child. When I fell in with you upon the road to Finchley last night, I knew well that I might snatch you from those fellows as easy as crack a nut. Didst not hear me tell the corporal that he had but to look in the face of a man that was struck to find himself in the pit directly? Lord! he had a woman's ears for the tale; and when Jack Atkins touched him this morning no woman ever wailed so. But it would have done little good to have carried you no further than the Fleet Bridge; and so I thought of this boat, in which, under God's providence, Master Hugh, we will

even pass the bounds, and be set down this night where no King's men shall look for us."

It was a great thing to hear, and I had such gladness of it that I clapped my hands when he had done, though very foolishly, since did I reflect upon it a little I must remember what small hope there was that his word would be justified, or that we should ever pass by the search which would follow upon my flight. For the matter of that, I had little desire of my liberty if it should not carry me to the arms of my dear wife, who lay waiting for me in Hadleigh Woods last night, and must now, I thought, be sore hurt that I had not come to her. And of this I spake to him; though he had no consolation for me, but was very sly and cunning.

"If you will have a little patience, Master Hugh," said he, "we will venture the acquaintance of some young waterman who shall carry us swift to Richmond. Odds, man, there is many a wench in that town — and what would you? Dost show no thankfulness that you are brought out of yon peril? As I live, another quarter on the clock would have seen

you in Newgate but for me and them that aided me."

"Well said, Master Wolf," exclaimed I; "yet what is that to me if I may not see my lady again? You know well she was a wife to me in the woods of Hadleigh."

"Oh!" said he, mighty loftily, "as for that, it is no affair of mine, Master Hugh. Bear with it, I beg of you, until this pursuit be done, and we have horses under us once more. And if you be advised by me, you will make haste to get a little food, for we are like to go far upon our hunger when we be come to the bank again."

I could make nothing of his saying, nor of that perplexing secrecy with which he tormented me. But I was far gone in hunger now, and very glad of the food which the bargeman offered us; though it was but coarse meat and biscuit, and cordial water very strong to the stomach. It was well to have Master Wolf's word that I might come on deck again, for the cabin was exceeding hot, and stunk mightily with an ill odour of fishes and oils which overpowered me. But up above it was pleasant enough; the full morning sun now shining brightly, and

the water rippling with glad music of its waves upon our rounded prow. I saw that we had passed Whitehall, and the place at Chelsea where the King and my lords bathed often in the river — he being a right good swimmer, as all the world knows. Thereafter we could see the rushes, thick and green upon the banks at Chelsea, and the house of my Lord of Cheyne, with the palace of the Bishop (my Lord of Winchester), and other great houses, all very noble, yet none more so than the manor at Fauxhall which my Lord of Worcester hath bought lately to make a college of artisans. In the observation of which things, and brought to new strength by the fresh breezes of the day, we passed an hour very well, though our eyes were often upon the water behind us; and Lord! I thought every minute to hear a clamour upon the bank, and to see the King's men waiting to take me with a wherry. But we saw none, save a few who lived in barges for fear of the plague, and here and there a camp of poor men and women set out in the fields. And so it was to Putney village, where I learned that we had done with him who rowed us.

"He is an honest fellow, and I have given him that which will tie his tongue," said old Israel, who had hailed a wherry from the steps. "It is now time that we went with more haste, lad, for one waits for us, and I like little to delay. Dost see yon fellow in the orange livery? — he is even going to show us his skill so far as Richmond. There, Master Hugh, we shall find horses for our legs and go like decent folk once more."

It was upon my tongue to ask whither; but the boat had now come up to us; and after that the two — he who rowed the barge and the fellow in the orange coat — had passed a word, very bawdy and ill to my ears, we made haste to take our places, and soon were carried swift by the oars and the tide toward the village of Mortlake, and thereafter to Kew. It was two of the afternoon when at last we beheld the inn at Richmond, and were brought there to find that the landlord looked for our coming, and was all ready to further our intention.

"Sir," said he, "the horses wait but for bridles, and if it be your wish, you shall set out upon the instant. Yet I have a barrel of good French claret in my cellar, and a loin of

beef, which you shall not better between here and Portsmouth. You may very well see the sun down upon that, gentlemen, if you can bide so long."

"It is well done, Master William," said Israel, as he led the way to the kitchen of the house. "For myself, let me ride in the cool of the night when I may, and a plague upon all your sunny roads. Haste to bring your claret, friend, that we may join you in praise of it; and if you have beds, we will even sleep an hour. Odds, man, we ride to the King, and perchance will whisper to some of the great folk there that they would do well to come with their wenches even to the Sign of the Jolly Waterman at Richmond."

The man went off in great haste and pleasure when he heard this; but I laughed to think that old Israel had tricked him so.

"Oh," said I, "that is a pretty tale to tell —Hugh Peters to see the King."

"Nay," cried old Israel, "you shall like the tale better presently."

It was vexing, I swear, that he should have hid so much from me, both of his intention and his plan; but I had been wanting sleep

for nigh twenty hours now, and was so gone in fatigue that scarce I had lips for the wine when the good fellow brought it. Expectation and doubt and peril had sustained me to this time; but no sooner was my head laid upon a pillow than I tumbled into a deep sleep, from which no man came to wake me until the sun was sunk and the moonlight rippling upon the silent river. It was full eleven of the clock then, and old Israel was already booted and up for the ride (God knew whither), as anxious and full-headed a man as I have known in all my life.

"Come, Master Hugh," said he, "the affair grows in haste, and we must n tarry. There is one waits for us ' Ux ridge who will give us good welcome. I beg you bring despatch to your assistance, and dress quickly the while I look to the horses. There is meat in the parlour, and you will do well to ride on a full belly. Nay, I know not if we shall eat again until the thing be done."

I was well awake now, and refreshed exceedingly; and I hastened to do as he had willed, setting to the meat with mighty relish, and finding the French claret as good as any apothecary's drug. He, meantime, had led

the horses to the door — a great bay for himself, and a shapely grey for me. Neither had he forgot our need of arms, for I observed two swords in his hand; and the ostler who held the horses was putting pistols in the holsters when I came out. It was wonderful to me, who knew nothing of his purpose, to see with what deliberation he ordered all things: swift, and yet no overlooking; with quick hands, and yet ever sure. So well, indeed, did he contrive it, that the church clock had struck but a half after eleven when we rode out of the yard and went clattering through the shuttered streets of the village until we struck the road to Hounslow and the confines of the bush-brown heath that lies about the town. And once past there we had a fair road before us; for it was to Uxbridge that we turned.

We went fast, I say, two black figures upon the moon-white road. Our horses were fresh, and willing of the night; we carried the strength of sleep in our limbs, the pleasant burden of hope in our hearts. It was to me like a very gift of God to think that the great and awful city lay far behind me; that I had been brought out of that pit of hell to

breathe the sweetness of the night, and to look upon the meadows once more. I cared nothing for the yesterday that was past or the morrow to come. My mind lay under a spell, refusing to plague me with any thought of why or whither. I cared only that I was upon the road again; out upon the broad grasses of the heath; a free man to speak and carry myself like other men. There was no desire in my will to question Israel, nor to converse with him; well enough to dream an hour, if thereby an hour of content should come.

This I said while we drew near to the village of Uxbridge, and heard a clock make it one of the new day. It had been in my mind that Master Wolf knew some good place of hiding for me in that village; and I was upheld in this hazard when, having ridden through the little street of the town, he turned to his right and began to follow an avenue exceeding dark and narrow. Long before we were come out of this, a watch-dog voiced a warning of our approach; and when we turned the bend and could see the house to which the path led, I observed lights shining from the windows; and, anon, someone came

running out to us — but first to me. Lord, that I should write it! For who else but my beloved wife did I behold standing there, and calling to me so sweetly that tears gushed up in my eyes and I was dumb from my exceeding love of her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

I LEARN THAT WE RIDE TO THE KING

"HUGH," she said, "dear Hugh — oh, how I have waited for thee! And now I touch thy hand. Oh, God be praised, who has given thee back to me."

I saw that she was all carried away by her love as she had never been in our lives before — no, not since the day when first she kissed me. It was a glad thing for me to learn that I was held in so much love by her; and when I leaped from my horse to take her in my arms, I seemed to harvest affection of her lips, holding her so close that her heart beat upon my own.

"Dearest wife," cried I, again and again, "surely the Lord Jesus hath heard my prayer, and I am come out of the valley of death to forget all in this exceeding happiness. Nay, draw not back from me, sweetest, for I love thee; God knows I love thee as man never loved woman yet."

She suffered me a little while; but afterwards, she withdrew herself very coyly from my embrace, and must go running up to old Israel to kiss his hands and tell him that she would never forget while her life was. I liked not to see her so kind toward him; but when I remembered what he had done for us, I made haste to join my thanks to hers.

"Surely," said I, "but for thee, old friend, we had never known this hour. The Lord be praised; this is the gladdest day Hugh Peters has lived in all his years. And how shall we thank thee, Israel! — ay, what thanks can be given to him who hath wrought such a work of his exceeding love?"

I said this, and took his hand as my lady had done; but he, overborne by our affection, hushed us with a gesture.

"Nay," cried he, "ye are like two children a-maying in the woods, and ye see not the storm which broods upon your pleasure. Bide yet, I beg of you; nor speak to me of thanks until we be come to Oxford and have the King's permission."

"To Oxford?" cried I, for this was the first I had heard of it.

"Ay, surely, to Oxford, Master Hugh,

where we must be as soon as the day. I doubt not you will find my lady all ready for the venture; and if I may speak, the sooner we set out upon it the better shall we fare therein."

"'T is well said," exclaimed Marjory, now falling to some gravity; "if we be not at Oxford to-morrow, we are like to get little good of the going. As for me, I am ready upon the instant. You will find the horses bitted — and all else as you have commanded, Master Wolf. It needs but to get a cup of wine and to learn if he who was hurt is able to go so far."

"Indeed," cried I, much vexed to hear that she knew of my hurt, "'t was but a flesh cut in the shoulder. If it were fought again to-morrow, I doubt not that I would have a good tale to tell. You must understand, Marjory, that he had the high place of the bank, which carried the advantage, as any honest man will admit. Yet I make sure —"

I would have said more, to let them know how it was that the man out of France had worsted me; but she commanded silence with a kiss upon my lips, and bidding Master Wolf

to follow, she led us to the great room of the house, where supper was set, and two servants, mighty fine and overbearing, waited our pleasure.

"You must know, Hugh," she said, "that this is the house of my kinsman, Sir Allen Apsley, who was always a true friend to me. When I learnt from Master Wolf that they had taken you, I rode hither, being well assured that he would bring you out though a hundred of the guard held you. We shall find none to spy upon us in this place; though, if God be willing, we may laugh at our enemies to-morrow."

"Marjory," said I, "you speak still in riddles; for how shall any man help me that am a felon fled from the prison gates? Well may you keep your secret if you have no better plan than this idle affair you name to me. Think you that the King will listen to Hugh Peters? Nay, it is a folly not to be borne."

I spoke with some heat so that she laughed at me, and the great serving-fellows looked one at the other very slyly. Lord! it was intolerable to me to have them standing there in observation of me, and very willingly

could I have given both of them a box upon the ears. But Master Wolf now came in with his word, and mighty serious to my relief.

"Mistress," said he, "do you, I beg, persuade Master Peters, as I have done often, to drink a cup of wine quickly and cloak his curiosity until we be in Oxford. The night goes swift, and the day will be to our undoing. I beseech you, remember our condition, and all that must be done before we better it."

"For a truth you speak well, Master Wolf," said she; "the horses shall be brought upon the instant, and as for Master Hugh, I promise you, he shall not put another question until we behold the lights of Oxford."

It was pretty to see how well she could put her hand upon the fire of quarrel and press it out. I loved her the more when she appeared to command me; and full well I knew that Israel was not the man to carry me to the King should harm come to me thereby. "If," said I, "my questions plague them, I will even be dumb to the end of it." Yet never was a fuller hope mine or so tender a gladness as when I rode away from the house at

Uxbridge and turned my horse's head towards the town of Wycombe and the great hills which barred the road to Oxford.

The night had fallen very dark now, with white mists in the meadows and mounts of rolling cloud shutting the moon from our sight. We were in all a company of five, two servants following my mistress, and old Israel going before us, very silent and melancholy, as though foreboding sat heavy upon his mind. But we two, who shared nothing of his thoughts, were very willing to ride side by side, often clasping our hands or suffering our horses to come close that we might whisper some new word of our love. Anon, however, Israel began to press forward at the gallop, and for near two hours we rode very fast, until, indeed, we made the town of Wycombe. Dawn was showing in the sky when we baited the half of an hour in the inn; but we were across the great hill when the sun was yet low in the heavens, and the bell of a parish church struck eight of the clock when our little company, sore dusted and with steaming horses, set glad eyes upon the spires of the fair city and knew that our journey was done.

Until this time Master Wolf had spoken rarely to us; but so soon as we were in the High Street of the town, and had begun to observe the schools and chapels and great colleges of learning, he turned to my mistress and began to make mention of the business which had carried us so far.

"My lady," said he, "here is the letter of which I spake. It will be well if it can be carried to the King while the day is yet new. Say naught beyond that which is writ there, unless you of your love shall choose to remember my name and to be of any service to me. You will know where to find me when the work is done. Tell them who ask that Israel Wolf waits the King's pleasure at the sign of the Mitre. I bid you delay not lest others be before us. Nay, here is the inn; and, if it please you, I will hasten to learn how best you may come at his Majesty."

He gave her a letter when he had done, and leaving us at the door of the tavern, he was away perhaps the quarter of an hour. Yet, on my part, I took heed neither of his coming nor his going. I seemed to stand in a new world, — a world full of noble people and scholars in their gowns, and doctors, very

learned, and jades rolling in their coaches; a city of churches and spires and domes — gay in the sunshine; yet withal a world upon which there breathed a spirit of knowledge as of God's best gift and token of his love. All the yesterday of tribulation went winging back to the confines of time's obscurities. A wizard might have carried me — ay, even out of jail, as the Lord carried His apostle, to set me here with my wonder. The steeples towering above me were as spires conjured up from the very earth to cheat me; the bells, ringing, spoke a message like a message from the city of enchantment. Nay, I swear that I forgot even my dear wife at my side, but, spell-bound in surprise and dreaming, I lived a life in those moments.

Master Wolf was away from us it might have been while one quarter struck upon the clock of the Cardinal's college. When he came out, he was still in talk with the master of the house, and both walked up to us very full of news.

"You are in fortune's way; do you seek the King, my lady?" said the stranger. "He bides here but another day, and will ride away to Milton at the dawn. He is even now

gone to walk in the meadows which lie behind the great church. I doubt not you will find some one among the company who will befriend you in an audience should you ride there upon the instant."

"Ay," said old Israel; "and since I hear that my Lord Buckhurst is but just passed, you will do well to press on at once. Never was his Majesty known to turn from a pretty face; this day, I make sure, shall not find him changed so much. You will not forget, my mistress, that I wait his Majesty's pleasure here in this house. Nay, he is like to send for me quick enough when he has read yon letter."

We did not understand the meaning of this saying then, when he delivered it at the inn door; but very excited both, and conscious that he had some affair of moment in his mind, we rode away to the door of Cardinal's college, and there left our horses. I was afraid at the first that they would never let us pass; but after we had stood awhile in disputation with the keeper what should happen but that my Lord Buckhurst came up, and he, knowing my lady well and mighty pleased to see her, offered his services upon the instant.

"Mistress Marjory, as I live!" exclaimed he. "Nay, his Majesty shall thank me for the tidings. Odds, he has heard but poor news of you this month past. Yet he has not forgot your pretty face, I dare swear. I will ask audience for you at once, if this good fellow, who does not love me, I think, will make acquaintance of the porter while we be gone. Saw ever man a rogue so fierce?"

"Sir," cried I, "an we had not come upon an affair of some importance, I would even make you take back that word. Though you had all the gold in the country upon your stomach, you should make haste to learn that I can handle a sword very prettily —"

"Tut, tut," said my lady, laughing very merrily, "wouldst fight the gentleman, Hugh? Put down your hand, silly boy, and anger not one I love so well as my Lord of Buckhurst. He is even going to carry us to the King. Wouldst have him say that I am wedded to a bumpkin who has no manners for his guerdon?"

My lord drew back at this, and looked at us both as though we played a jest upon him. It was not to be hid from me that Marjory coloured when put to the ordeal; and, Lord!

thought I, it is for shame of me. God knows, I had some little shame myself that my clothes were so ill and dusted from the ride — yet that she should colour because the world knew of her love was a thing not to be borne. Nay, I had the impulse to turn away from her and go — I knew not whither, save it were to some place where she should never hap upon me, no, nor be put to confusion for her love of me. But she, of a sudden remembering herself, took my hand very prettily in hers, and faced my Lord Buckhurst with all that great courage which has been my abiding pride since the day when first I knew her.

"My lord," said she, laughing no more, "you were ever a friend to me. Never had I the need of your friendship as upon this day. Take me to the King that I may speak a word for him I love; do this, and you shall find none more grateful in all the city."

"Mistress," said he, and his voice was now very kind, as of one who had a great regard for her, "I will even carry you to the King at once; and to your word my own shall be added."

He bowed to her with a fine air which put

me to envy; and bidding us follow at his heels, he led the way by the great court, and afterwards to the gardens themselves, very sweet with flower and shade, and trees grown old in leaf, and silent places where lovers now thrust forth the scholars, and themselves were busy with the book of good amours. But the King was not here; and we went on yet until we were out in the open meadows, and had the river in our view, and great acres of green grasses, and the buildings of the college upon our left hand. Here we espied at a distance a company of fine folk, both men and women: the sun being bright upon the silver and gold of their vests and swords, and their plumes waving like boughs in the wind of morning. I perceived plainly that his Majesty must be among the number of these, and for the first time there came a great awe upon me. "God!" said I, "he will remember that I hunted him at Worcester, when he was an outcast, and I the first among them." And, Lord! it was an awful thing to tell myself that I had lusted for his blood in the olden time, — I, the farmer's son, that was now but a worm at his feet. God knows I had the impulse to draw back, though it were at the

ultimate moment of our emprise; but a remembrance of the soldier's heart that once had beat under my corselet upheld me. I knew that I had wrought then such things as the Lord had commanded me; and if I had been the enemy of Charles Stuart, it was God's will which set enmity in my mind. "Nay," said I at last, "let him do what he will, and I will show him what the Lord-General hath taught me, King though he be." There was upon me in that moment a breath of the spirit of him I had loved and followed,— of him that made my arms like bows of iron and poured into my heart the fire of his own courage — a fire burning strong in battle to scorch the enemies of God. I began to remember again how poor and worthless were all these bawbles to cloak the wickedness and the weakness of them who now flaunted their sins before my country, and cried to all the world that this was merry England. "Oh!" said I, "that none should be found in this day to bear the Lord-General's sword and bid us up, in the Lord's name, to put evil-doers to their punishment, and to make this my country merry indeed in the gladness of her righteousness!"

All this passed in my impulse, I say, and held me silent while the gay company approached. Had they offered me a kingdom for the word, I could not have said aught to better myself in that moment. For a truth, I stood like a dumb man, seeing the people and yet not seeing them. I can mind me that there were several that I knew in the throng: my Lord Lauderdale in a suit of grey and silver, very fine and sparkling; Sir George Carteret ill dressed in a coat of black, but no lace upon his stomacher; Master Harry Sidney — him that they declared to be in love with the Duchess — wondrous fine, in a white dress with gold wrought upon his vest; my Lord Brouncker; my Lord Sandwich — these and many others, with a dozen noble ladies and jades, very merry, but odd-looking, with their hair combed up like towers, and mighty spreading skirts, whereunder you could perceive rich laces and other robes white and broidered. All these I beheld, and in the midst of them Charles Stuart himself, gay of the morning, with a suit of violet silk sitting shapely upon him, and a falcon at his wrist, and full of talk for all about him. Nor did he, I think, spy us at once as we stood there,

confused and hesitating, beneath the shade of a great oak-tree, but came on regardless of us until my Lord Buckhurst stepped before him and began to make his purpose known. Scarce, however, had he said two words when the King turned his eyes toward us, and, observing little Marjory, advanced swift to meet us.

"God's life!" said he, "whom have we here? Why, 't is our little runaway come back with a footpad. Nay, rise, little mistress, for we give you good welcome."

I burned to tell him that I was no footpad, but an honest yeoman's son whom he had once feared exceedingly; but my tongue refused me, and somehow — I think that they pulled me — I found myself kneeling before him, — a thing I had sworn never to do, yet now did mighty foolishly and with ill grace. As for my dear wife, she made courtesy sweet to behold; and then the fine folk standing all about us, most curious and laughing, with the sun falling strong through the leaves of the tree, and the spires of the beautiful city standing out clear in the morning air, and the river all silvered and shining below, little Marjory spake gently to the King.

"Your Majesty," she cried, "there was a day when you said of your good will that aught I asked of you should be given unto me. I make bold to kneel before you, and to remind you of the bond even to this, — that my husband shall find favour in your sight, both for your love of me and for that service which is told in the letter I bear. Nay, your Majesty, read, I beg, for these are matters of life and death, not to be hid from you any longer!"

She spake wondrous sweetly, her fair face all rosy with the breath of morning, and her breast telling plainly how her heart beat. For my part, I could say nothing; but, abashed and silent, I watched the King while he took the letter — not with any fixed purpose, but idly and indifferently, looking in astonishment both at my wife and at me, the while the gay folks were all a-titter and undisguised in their amusement thereby.

The King, I say, took the letter, and, holding it with seal unbroken in his hand, he cried —

"St. Louis! what a tale is this? Nay, sweet, how shall an affair of importance bring me so pretty a messenger? Say, rather,

that yon rogue has tried to do thee a hurt, and that I am to have him hanged upon the instant."

They all made haste to laugh again at this; but my lady, with a wondrous tenderness for me, at which I loved her the more, was quick to make her mind known.

"Oh, your Majesty, speak not so — for 't is Hugh Peters who kneels to you, and he was husband to me in the days long ago. And if he must die, then, indeed, am I content to die with him!"

She shamed them with the speech. Even Charles Stuart was moved thereby, and mocked her no longer, but put out his hand to her and drew her near to him.

"Surely," said he, "I will pardon half the rogues in the kingdom sooner than see tears in those pretty eyes. Come, little one, we go to breakfast. Make bold to walk with us a little way the while we have your story. And as for your paper — let my Lord Buckhurst read it that he may pen us a comedy against the day we ride to London."

My lady was frighted at this.

"Oh, sir," she cried, "if you love your life, command that yon be read upon the spot, or

they will surely kill you. 'T is a very great matter writ there — and he that wrote it is the best of men."

There were murmurs from the great folk now, and all gathered close about the King, while Sir George Carteret broke the seal of the letter, and he and my Lord Buckhurst read it together. When they had done they spoke to their master in low voices; and many being come round them to have the news, my Lord Sandwich cried presently, —

"Where shall we hear of the fellow that hath written this?"

"He is at the Sign of the Mitre, where your Majesty shall find him until sunset," answered my lady.

"Then let him be taken at once," cried my Lord Lauderdale, who turned to the King for his orders.

"Not so quick, my lord," exclaimed Charles Stuart; "it may even be that all he says is writ of his honesty. They will never kill me to make James their King."

"Sire, is that wise?" said my Lord Buckhurst. "This man, who admits that he was to be their instrument, may even be come to Oxford upon their business."

I had listened to all this in wonder, for I was slow to perceive that old Israel had made some great confession in his letter. But while they talked, I began to understand the thing and to remember how he had spoken, very covertly, of Sir Nathaniel Goulding and of work he would do. "By God," said I at last, "the man of France meant to kill the King by the hand of Master Wolf, who now hath staked his life for ours. Oh, Master Wolf, Master Wolf, what a love is this!"

The thing came to me like a voice from on high, — both the understanding of Israel's purpose, and the intention to lay hands upon him. And thereafter I could keep silent no more; but, throwing myself at the King's feet, I cried —

"Sire, oh! for God's sake, think not ill of Master Wolf. Has he not come here to warn your Majesty, when he could have betaken himself — ay, where no King's man could have hap'd upon him. Sire, he loves you well. There is no sword like the sword of Israel Wolf in all the world, no, nor heart so brave, nor courage so good. Will your Majesty turn from such a one? Nay, surely, take my life for his, — I that am outcast from the world.

Oh, Sire, it will be good to die if the life of Israel Wolf be given to me."

They heard me in a great silence, the King much impressed, and little Marjory looking down upon me very sweetly. I heard a whispered talk among them, and presently his Majesty spake to me.

"So this is Master Peters," cried he — "a pretty fellow to answer for any rogue. Nay, I like not thy looks, man — yet I dare swear thou hast an honest heart."

"Your Majesty," cried I, "do you but command me in aught, and you shall learn whether I be honest or no. What I speak now I speak of my affection. Oh, for the love of God, let no harm come to Master Wolf!"

There was more talk among them now, and my lady, being moved to great grief, fell out of a sudden in sobs and weeping. Nay, she made bold to kiss the King's hand, and I saw her tears running upon it.

"Your Majesty," cried she, "you did not love to see me hurt in the old time. Surely you are not changed toward me so much."

"God's life," cried the King, "you speak a true word, little mistress. Let us go now to

breakfast. When that is done, we will take counsel upon this affair. Command that Master Wolf wait upon me at Magdalen College. I promise that no hurt shall come to him, and if he prove honest, we shall know how to thank him."

I heard the promise with a surpassing joy. Nor did I care that my wife was carried off by them to breakfast at the college; but, being strong with a great gladness, I ran back to the inn, and began to call loudly for Master Wolf.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

He had been looking for my news mighty anxiously; and now when I told him all that had come to pass, and bade him set out for Magdalen College at once, he had no mistrust of the venture.

"'T is as simple as the hour upon the clock," cried he. "I doubt not I shall make it plain to the King, Master Peters. Nay, thank me not at all. Sufficient that you hold me your friend . . ."

"Israel," cried I, "there is no friend like thee in all the world. Yet I am dumb upon it to my shame. Things are misted to my eyes, and I have naught clear before me but this, — that thou art in peril. Oh, surely, they shall not harm thee, Israel!"

"Master Hugh," cried he, "fear not at all for me, neither for my life nor my deeds. Odd were it that I, who have borne my

burden against the world since the day my mother died, should turn now from a score of men that have lace upon their stomachs and the hearts of women 'neath their cloaks. God's word, I would best the city for a sack of ale and think naught of the achievement. Well enough that I should tell them how they stand, and what manner of man this Nathaniel Goulding is to set up the Pope's religion among them and to make James their King."

"Ay," cried I, "that is a great tale to tell; and you have proof, old Israel?"

"I have the letter writ by Captain Goulding now two months gone. Therein it is set down how that the time is ripe to strike the blow, and I am bidden to be their instrument. Charles Stuart was to be taken the while he rode to Windsor; the friends of the Duke were to be ready upon the instant to proclaim him, with Louis of France and the Pope of Rome at their backs. Thinkest thou that I would put my hand to such devil's work? God be my witness, I would the sooner cut it off."

"Was it to this end," asked I, "that the man came out of France?"

"Not at the first, but only when the business of the French alliance was in peril. He believed that thou hadst wind of the mischief and knew from thy kinsmen in Paris of his intent. Thereafter he set out to hunt thee — yet dared not to kill thee because thou wast Mistress Marjory's friend. I doubt not he used her well, both to have information of that which passed at Whitehall and of all that concerned thy life."

"Lord," cried I, "that thou shouldst make me see it all so, Master Israel! 'T is as clear as a play — yet I doubt not that they will lay hands upon him."

"Nay," said he, "the man who would put hands upon Sir Nathaniel Goulding must even go to Paris for the purpose. He took ship the day they took thee, Master Hugh."

"Would to God I had killed him!" said I. "If the high place of the bank — but that is known to thee, Israel. Go now to the King, and Almighty God be thy shield in this hour."

It was mighty astonishing to me to perceive how slow Master Wolf was, both then and at other times, to discern peril in his path. Never was there man so bold in an emprise

or so ready to make naught of his own life. He set out now to Magdalen College as merry as a jester at a fair; nor did he once remember my word that they had willed to put him under arrest.

"Leave me to myself, lad," cried he; "there is no prison in Oxford city to hold Israel Wolf, no, nor jailer. You shall see me again within the hour."

It was good to hear him speak so, and I believed him, being content now that he should go, yet looking expectantly to see him return with my dear wife. But the hour passed, and upon that, another; and I saw nothing of them, and must pace the street wearily, telling myself a hundred foolish things, — that they had taken my mistress from me and never again should I behold her.

Indeed, it was four of the clock, and I was sick with fatigue and waiting, when at last a coach rolled up to the door of the inn, and I beheld, to my surpassing joy, little Marjory within it, and my Lord Buckhurst and another, very fine in a dress of violet. Lord! it was gladness to find a laugh upon my mistress's sweet face and to perceive the merri-

ment of old time in her eyes — even the jest upon her lips.

"Dearest Hugh," she cried, running up gladly to me, "they are to carry thee from the city upon the instant. Art not glad?"

"How?" said I, "they carry me from the city —"

But she lacked answer for her laughing; and presently, my Lord Buckhurst coming up, they all set to plague me: one saying that I must ride to Paris forthwith; another that the King willed to send me to Bergen, whereat I must spend ten years before they would hearken to the tale of my marriage. Nor could I learn the truth from them, but must sit down like a booby while they made merry with my dear wife, and called for the French wines, and shamed me with their gay talk — very witty and past me, God knows. We were in the very midst of this when we heard a clatter of hoofs in the street without; and whom should we see but the King himself and a great cavalcade with him, and many coaches and the Duchess and other jades, slyly peeping from the windows at the gallants about them. To my wonder, they all drew rein at the door of the inn, and Sir

George Carteret calling for me — a thing I had never waited for if I had lived to be a hundred — I found myself presently standing before his Majesty, and he speaking to me mighty seriously.

"Master Peters," cried he, "I owe you no love, nor can I find any for you. Give your gratitude, then, to those who have earned it, and especially to your dear wife, whom we hold in our affections. I take a great burden upon me in doing this thing; but for her sake, and the service which your friend Israel Wolf has done me, I now remember you and am even going to pronounce your pardon. Your father's house at Warboys yet stands, I think. Carry yourself there, I command you, and let none in London hear so much as a word from you until the year be done. My Lord Buckhurst knows my wishes in this matter. Hearken to him then; and when they speak of your King, see that no evil word is found upon your tongue."

He waited neither for my thanks nor my assent; but permitting Mistress Marjory once more to kiss his hand, and saluting her very affectionately, he set spurs to his horse and passed from my sight. Long I stood watch-

ing the gay cavalcade as it followed him out of the city; but when the last coach was no more to be seen, I turned round swift to hold my mistress in a sweet embrace.

For the night of my years had passed, and God of his mercy had given me the day.

We left Oxford at the setting of the sun; my lady and I, with the two servants that had followed her from Uxbridge. Glad words of happiness were upon our lips; the glory of the sinking day flushed in our hearts and warmed them to our surpassing love. There was this only to trouble us — that we perforce had quitted the city without word from Master Wolf; nor could we learn how it had fared with him.

"Though I would well have given him some new token of gratitude," said my lady, "I doubt not that he is content with the King's favour. 'T was a promise to me that no harm should come to Israel Wolf."

"Sweetheart," said I, "let that be a name held fresh in our affection while we have life. God knows if ever I loved one as I love Master Wolf. Nay, I look for the day when he shall come to us at Warboys, to be forever

with us,—he and Master Ford, and them that stood with me in this evil time. Ay, to tell Master Ford of this day's work! Surely that shall be a pretty writing!"

"Dear Hugh," cried she, "it is good to hear thee talk so. Draw close and tell me that thou art content."

I told her as lovers will, kissing her hand often, and holding it still even as we rode. We had left the city now, and could see it shining as with fires in the valley below us, the sun striking its towers with a full light of crimson, and all the buildings rising up nobly in the golden setting. But our road lay to the north; and when we had ridden to the parting of the ways, whereat you turn westward to London, we espied a horseman coming after us at the gallop. It was no other than Master Wolf himself; and when we saw him, we were back upon the instant to overwhelm him with our words of love.

"God's blessing be upon thee, old Israel," cried I. "Surely we have hungered for news of thee, and knew not how it was that thou didst not return to the inn. But now we have thee, and no more—"

He hushed me with his hand, the while he

reined his great horse with labour, and made it clear that he was pressed.

"Master Hugh," said he, "I go to Paris upon the King's business. When I come back, you shall hear of me,—you and her you love, and those that will come presently to be held in new affection of you. Nay, trouble not at all about me, for this is my day. The King hath entrusted me with an affair of great moment, and I look to profit thereby as I have never done in all my life. You shall hear of me from Paris presently, and of great doings. I give thee farewell, lad; but thy love is in my heart, and black be the day when I forget thee."

He would hear no more of our protestations, but, stooping to kiss my dear wife's hands, he galloped away presently toward London, and was lost to our sight.

And, God knows, I prayed in my heart that he would come back to me once more to be my friend through all the years.

THE END.

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